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April 21, 1885.

Vol. XVI.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 404.



BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"

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AUTHOR OF "ROMEO AND THE REDS," "GIANT
GEORGE," "OLD ROCKY'S BOYEES," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

PECAN PETE.

"SUFFERIN' Moses, pard! Air yer gittin' fu-
nified? D'yer s'pose, arter skutin' through ther
cussed chap'rel, an' corralin' ther condemned
coyote, we're goin' ter 'low him ter dust out, free
an' airy, an' sashay 'roun' loose, cuttin' up, an'
raisin' Toj het giner'ly!

"Dang me, ef he hadn't better wabble out a
few prays, ef he knows any, fer he's gut ter
swing on a limb, an' dance on nothin', in a few
fleetin' periods? You hear me sling gab? I
mean biz, Ned. Thet's ther vardict o' Pecan
Pete!"

"But, Pete, old pard, he swears he is not one
of Cortina's men. Besides, he says that he has
important information for Senorita Benton, at
the next ranch, and he looks and acts like an
honest boy."

The first speaker was a tall, raw-boned, thin-
baced Texan, with long sun-burnt hair, and a
ragged mustache and goatee; the remainder of

THE NEXT MOMENT, DOWN THE BED OF THE WASH-OUT, GALLOPED A HANDSOME
WHITE YOUTH.

his face being very much tanned by sun, smoke, and wind. His eyes were small, black and keen, and were constantly darting from beneath overhanging brows, sharp and suspicious glances in all directions, indicating a close acquaintance with constant danger. Revolvers and bowie-knife were belted around him with an old strap of leather.

All in all, he was a good sample of the general run of prairie and chaparral wanderers of the Lone Star State, at the time of which we write.

The man whom he addressed, was just the opposite in many respects.

He was young—not more than five-and-twenty—of medium height, his form well rounded and symmetrical, and his features regular and decidedly handsome.

A glossy dark-brown mustache and imperial gave him a more manly appearance than he would have otherwise presented. His hair hung low over his shoulders, and was dark brown and wavy.

Although he was armed and attired in the same manner as his comrade, his costume was new and showy, and his arms highly ornamented. The flush of health was upon his face, and honesty was plainly revealed in his dark-blue eyes, as was firmness by the formation of his chin and lip, and in his air and entire poise and carriage.

Such was Nueces Ned—a perfect type of the young, dashing, and fearless Texans, who, a score of years ago, served as rangers and minute-men on the frontiers.

Near these two men stood a Mexican youth, evidently their captive, his wrists being bound fast with a lariat behind his back, the raw-hide rope trailing on the ground.

While Pecan Pete was speaking, as recorded, he was engaged in jerking the equipments from his horse, with some impatience, not to say indignation, and Nueces Ned also divested his steed of saddle and bridle at the moment of his interceding in behalf of the prisoner.

A third animal, which evidently belonged to the young Mexican, Pete also attended to with quick and nervous movements; the group, meanwhile, standing in a small "open," amid the far-stretching chaparral, and about two hours' gallop down the bank of the Rio Grande from Ringold Barracks.

At the upper margin of this "open" there was a "wash-out," extending south, and increasing in width and depth in that direction. Its walls were steep, and of hard, rough, and irregular clay. Dense chaparral grew to the very edge of its west bank.

The horses of the two Texans were hardy half-breeds, there being as much difference in the mustangs as in their owners, and in their equipments as well. Pete's beast was rough and ungainly, but strong, and evidently capable of great speed, while Ned's nag was sleek, glossy, and clean-limbed. Quickness of movement and speed were indicated by the toss of its head, and its springy bound at the slightest alarm.

The animal of Pete was as keenly watchful and guarded as its owner, frequently lifting its grass-filled jaws, and gazing suspiciously around it.

The horse of the captive was small, of Spanish stock, and a beauty.

The trio of men and horses formed a picture, that would have charmed the eye of an observer—the picture framed by an almost impassable chaparral, the red glow of the setting sun just filtering through the sparse foliage of the mesquites, the highest of the hundred and one thorny bushes that formed the thickets.

The captive, we have said, was a Mexican.

He was slender, handsome, indeed almost feminine in appearance, apparently not more than fourteen years of age, supple and wiry in form and motion. His features were small and well formed, and his skin was certainly less stained by the blood of his Indian ancestors than was that of Pecan Pete by camp-fire and constant prairie travel.

A velvet *jaqueta* and breeches, both profusely ornamented with silver buttons, the latter being sustained by a red silk sash, the long fringed ends of which hung down on either side; thus was the captive youth costumed.

Erect he stood, showing something of amazement, as well as apprehension, as he glanced from one to the other of his captors the expression of his face showing that he understood their words. He was panting, his olive skin was flushed, and his clothing torn, indicating recent exertion to escape, and no gentle usage.

Pecan Pete turned from having cared for the horses, a moment after Nueces Ned had spoken in favor of the youthful Mexican. It was evident that the old scout was offended at his

pard's words, and entertained bitter hatred toward the captive.

Pete returned to the front of the Mexican, as he replied to Ned; meanwhile gazing, with vengeful triumph, upon the helpless youth.

"Pard Ned, yer makes me sick enough ter puke up my hull inward systematics. Why, dog-gone my gizzard, ef it doesn't 'pear like yer b'lieved a Greaser c'u'd speak ther plain squar' truth!"

"I 'lows he's young an' innercent-like. Howsomever, hit don't do, these ticklish times, ter 'low any soft sodder feelin's ter creep through yer bleed-box. Greasers air all hacked off'n ther same log, I reckon; leastwise, nary one I ever run ag'in' hed white bleed enough inter his carkiss ter let a chance ter stick a Texan in the back slip by."

"I doesn't want none on 'em rootin' round me. Hit 'u'd be a roarin' hurrah ef we'd 'low him ter take free range, arter all ther devilishness his sort hev scattered up an' down ther Grande! We-uns corraled him skulkin' in ther mesquites, an' he tried his bestest ter gi'n us ther slip, which air proof 'nough fer Pecan Pete thet he air crooked. Ned, ole pard, I'm fear'd ye're gittin' chicken-hearted."

"It may appear so to you, Pete, and I may be deceived. The Mexicans, I know, are as a body just what you say; but this boy seems honest and trustworthy. I say, give him a chance to prove his assertions true."

"We-uns air hyer, Ned, ter clean out ther dang'd Greaser scum, an' I'm goin' ter tend ter biz, every time! I kin choke ther cuss off this hyer yearth, an' put a stop ter his doin' futur' devilment alone without yer help, an' not half try; but I reckons that afore ye're with me on many chap'rell trails, yer won't waste much time listenin' ter a Greaser's lies."

As Pete said this he caught up a lariat from his saddle.

"Perhaps you are right," returned Ned, "but I don't believe my thirst for revenge will include every Mexican whom I may capture. There must be some good men and women among them."

"Dang'd ef yer hain't struck ther bull's-eye es 'gards ther weemin, pard Ned! I goes hefty on Mex' caliker. Now, Greaser"—to the captive—"I'm ready ter gi'n yer a speedy send-off. Ef yer hain't wabbled a pray, I can't help it, fer yer hes hed time enough, I swow!"

As Pete spoke, he cast the deadly noose over the head of the Mexican youth, whose face became ghastly. Drawing the captive after him, until beneath the branches of one of the mesquite trees that grew on the margin of the "open," the scout threw the slack of the lariat over the limb, and again spoke:

"Now, Greaser, I hes heerd yer leeble story, an' hit warn't swallered. Nary onc't kin yer pull wool over Pecan Pete's peepers. Hit's all bosh, clean through! I doesn't b'lieve thar's a man nam'd o' Benton on ther Grande."

"Et sich a 'portant time es this hyer, I'd s'pose yer'd sift out all ther gab what sticks in yer crop; but ye're runnin' yer own tongue, I reckon, until I puts a stop ter hit fer good."

The lips of the doomed boy moved in prayer, in a quivering manner, and his brilliant black eyes were fastened on the sky, which was still blended with the red glow of sunset.

He seemed not to entertain a thought of suing for his life, or for mercy of any kind; indeed, there was no hope that such a plea would have been listened to by the revengeful and merciless scout.

The rope was jerked taut!

"*Madre de Dios!*" burst from the lips of the Mexican youth at the first twitch of the lariat.

The next instant the strong arms of Pecan Pete jerked him free from the ground, the convulsed form revolving slowly, the handsome face contorted in agony, and the dark eyes bulging from their sockets.

It was a terrible sight.

Nueces Ned heaved a sigh, though he saw it not; but even as the rope became taut, there sounded upon the astonished ears of the two Texans the crashing of bushes and thumping of hoofs. These sounds came from the north, and the next moment, down the bed of the wash-out, galloped a handsome white youth, about the same age as the Mexican who now hung suspended in the agonies of strangulation.

It was evident at once to the Texans that this white lad was pursued. His manner and actions proved this, and the sounds beyond, as well.

Soon, however, he caught a view of the scene in the "open," and as the face of the suspended sufferer swung around, the new-comer yelled in a voice of anguished pleading:

"Let him down! Let him down, for God's sake! He's white to the back-bone! I swear it—I'm Little Lariat!"

Down to the earth fell the struggling form, even before the plea for him had been finished; for Pecan Pete saw that which brought all his fighting propensities to the front, as did also Nueces Ned.

Instantly loosening the lariat about the Mexican's neck, Pete jerked his revolver as the weapon of his pard belched fire and lead; that of the youth who had given his cognomen as "Little Lariat" following suit as he turned in his saddle.

The scene that followed was impressive and startling to an amazing degree.

At least half a score of brutal-looking Mexicans dashed toward the "open" in chase of the Texan boy, some in the mesquites, others in the wash-out. They were, however, dumfounded by the surprise that awaited them—or, at least, those who had time for such an emotion.

The deadly "sixes" of the two Texans sounded in quick succession, and shrieks and groans followed. Half of the Greasers were slain before the survivors had time to recover and flee.

But even in the startled and amazed frame of mind in which they were at this unexpected assault, our two friends saw the handsome white youth, "Little Lariat," fall headlong from his horse to the bed of the wash-out at the first discharge of the guns of the Mexicans, when the latter broke free from the mesquites.

CHAPTER II.

CAPITAN CARAJAL.

ONE week previous to the events detailed in our first chapter, there had been a ball in Rio Grande City; many of the U. S. officers being present, from Ringold Barracks, a station just below the town. The entertainment was gotten up by the first families of the "city," or it would have been called a fandango.

Conspicuous on the occasion, was an American maiden of about eighteen, the acknowledged belle of the ball. Her features were of the Grecian type, her eyes of heavenly blue, and her hair golden, long, and wavy; presenting a striking contrast to the dark-eyed, dark-skinned senoritas, who made up the larger portion of the assemblage.

A handsome youth, younger than herself, and strongly resembling her, attended her, and kept close watch and ward over her. This was Bert Benton, or "Little Lariat" and the maiden was his sister, Bertha Benton.

The cognomen mentioned had been given to the boy, on account of his being an expert lassoist. He was also noted, up and down the Rio Grande, for his bravery and fearlessness. Like his sister, he would have chained the attention of an observer at once; for his hair, like hers, was golden, his complexion fair, and his form slight; the flash of his eyes, and his proud bearing banishing somewhat the feminine appearance, otherwise so noticeable.

Both he and Bertha resided with their widowed mother, the ranch being but an hour's gallop from Ringold Barracks, down the river. They had a small stock of cattle, but their horses and mules, once numerous, had been driven over the Bravo by the Mexican bandits; their father having been slain by the yellow-skinned marauders, while endeavoring to defend his property.

Thus far, the outlaws had not molested the ranch of the Bentons; probably for the reason that it was situated some little distance from the traveled trail.

After the tragic death of her husband, Mrs. Benton longed to fly from the dangerous vicinity of the Rio Grande; but she had no place to flee unto. Everything that she owned was invested in cattle and horses, and these last had been stolen. Besides, at that time, it was impossible to dispose of her ranch.

The poor woman feared for the safety of her children and herself, but Little Lariat was averse to abandoning their home, and he had recorded a solemn vow to avenge the death of his father. So it happened, that they remained.

The Bentons were from a good old Southern family, who had, like many others who choose their homes in the wilds of Texas, been reduced in means, from various causes. Mrs. Benton, being a lady of high culture, attended thoroughly to the education of her children, who were both of them apt scholars; and this was fortunate for them, for there were no schools in the neighborhood.

Little Lariat had never forgotten his oath of vengeance, and many a lawless Mexican fell before his true aim. His services, as a spy for the rangers, had been of great benefit; thus gaining for him a wide reputation for one so young, and

also the hatred of the Mexican outlaws of the Rio Grande.

Yet the boy never tried to avoid danger.

He appeared to be utterly devoid of fear.

He was skillful with revolver and rifle, and could throw his bowie-knife with surprising accuracy. Bertha frequently accompanied her brother amid the chaparrals, searching for stray cattle; and, although Little Lariat was nearly four years his sister's junior, she looked upon him as a man, and her protector, relying trustfully upon him in all things.

There was little in the way of amusement at the isolated ranch; and it was, therefore, with pleasure that the boy accepted the invitation to the ball, which had been extended to himself and his sister. He was relieved of the charge of the latter, soon after his arrival; as an officer, from the station below, claimed her hand for the next waltz—Bertha being a great favorite with the army men.

After this, the young lady became the center of an admiring circle; and Bert, although he was not exactly at home in female society, became attracted toward a pretty Mexican girl, whom he knew simply as *Senorita Lollita*.

Little did he dream that this seeming girl was a boy in disguise, and one who was fated to be greatly indebted to himself.

With this seeming pretty and graceful maiden, Little Lariat became quite intimate; each being drawn toward the other by some unaccountable influence. There came a time, however, during the festivities, when the Texan youth missed his favorite; and sought her in vain.

Although ever suspicious and watchful when Bertha was with him, upon this occasion the boy dreamed not of the possibility of danger in such a respectable gathering, and was lax in his usual vigilance.

Had he taken notice of the entrance to the room devoted to dancing, he would have been on guard, and had his suspicions aroused, for, in the midst of the revelry, a Mexican peered inside. This man appeared to be somewhat above the middle class in intelligence, but had a most cruel and vindictive look in his serpent-like eyes.

These glittered with admiration, when he caught a view of Bertha Benton, whirling amid the gay throng. It would have been evident to even the most casual observer, that the stranger wished to avoid notice; for he kept himself back, as far as was possible, from the door, and at the same time gain a view of the interior of the apartment.

As the dancers were fully engaged, and the lookers-on intent upon viewing the fitting forms, the lurker remained unnoticed. His manner and position proved that he was not an invited guest, and it was clear that he avoided notice. An expression of murderous hatred convulsed his dark face, as the officer whirled with Bertha past the entrance near him, and he realized that the pair were on terms of intimacy.

The watcher was a trusted captain of the Scourge of the Rio Grande, Cortina the bandit; and, turning with a gesture of caution, he hissed in a low tone:

"Look, Pedro, quickly! Who is she? *Caramba!* I would give a year of my life to embrace her; and, by all the saints, I'll do it! I swear it—I, Canales Carajal!"

A low-browed villain bent forward, at this remark from his chief.

An ejaculation of surprise and recognition broke from Pedro's lips, neither of the men noticing the seeming maiden who passed out from the ball-room, brushing the captain as he spoke. Had it been a man, the lurkers might have been more guarded; but, as it was, they paid no attention to the passing female.

This was none other than the self-styled *Lollita*, who had won the friendship of Little Lariat, but who was in reality a Mexican youth, Jose Sanchez by name, masquerading for the night in female attire.

Jose caught the words and the expression of the face of Capitan Carajal, and not only this, but he recognized the bandit. He perceived at once that Little Lariat and his sister were in danger. He knew them by reputation, and had long desired to form their acquaintance.

Instantly Jose resolved to do all in his power to defeat any plot that Carajal might form against the Benton family. Well he knew the desperate character of the captain, and that it would be useless to betray the bandit's presence, as there was no doubt he had a force with him; and, in the event of an attempted capture by the United States officers, many non-combatants would be slain, while the bandits would, most of them, escape beyond the river.

It was evident that Carajal was fascinated be-

yond control by the beauty of Bertha Benton. A single glance into his face convinced Jose that he would risk much to gain possession of her.

The boy hesitated not a moment, but passed out into the open night air, where the bright moon illumined the earth.

Advancing down a side street to a lone hut, he entered, and soon emerged in a fancy male suit of velvet, handsomely ornamented with silver buttons. A revolver and bowie-knife were buckled about his waist, and he stole on toward the *casa*, within which the dance was going on; taking advantage of every shadow, dwelling, and clump of bushes.

Within a dense thicket of mesquites, and within sound of the music, Jose hesitated, making halt in deliberation; and he thanked the Fates that he had done so, for almost immediately after, Capitan Carajal and Pedro skulked around the *casa* walls, and stole into the same thicket with him. The boy crouched low, and listened with palpitating heart; his hand gripping bowie-knife and revolver.

"Speak now, and quickly, Pedro! Why were you afraid to stay by the door? What have you to fear, and who is that *senorita*?"

Thus spoke Carajal, with nervous impatience. "*Caramba!* Would you care to throw your life away? Had we remained, I would have been shot. I saw one whom I knew too well. I was with the party that killed his father, and he knows it. You cannot kill him—"

"Curse it!" exclaimed the captain; "cease your woman's talk and speak sense and to the point, or I'll save that young *diablo*—whoever he is—the trouble of splitting your heart! Speak, I say—who did you see?"

As he spoke, Carajal clutched Pedro by the arm, and jerked a knife.

The Mexican was evidently terrified; his voice as he rattled off his words of explanation, and his whole manner proved this.

The lower classes of Mexico are extremely superstitious. They believe that certain persons are protected by the Fates, or else the Furies, thus causing it to be impossible to kill them.

Pedro controlled himself by a great effort, and replied to his chief quickly, and as the latter had demanded, to the point:

"Pedro saw Little Lariat at the *danza*, and the *senorita*, with the hair of gold, is his sister."

"*Santissima Maria!*" cried out Carajal, in surprise and exultation. "Good news is this to your capitan, Pedro Pinales. It is worth ten doubloons, and you shall have them when I hold the *senorita* in my grasp!"

"*Diablo!* But there is a chance for revenge! Curses on that Little Lariat! I have heard of him. I will steal his sister this night. Do you hear, Pedro? Haste and tell my men to lay low, for I have other plans. Hold! Know you the trail to the ranch of Little Lariat?"

"Yes, my capitan."

"Good! We will ambush them, for they will return to-night. Think you not so?"

"They will ride home after the *danza*."

"Good, again! Come, we will join our comrades, and prepare for the capture. You need not fear the pistol of that Texan boy. He shall cross the Bravo with his sister, and then die. I swear it—I, Canales Carajal!"

Not daring to disobey, Pedro followed his capitan, and they disappeared amid the chaparral.

With clinched hands uplifted, the handsome Mexican youth seemed to mutter an oath. He then stole back to his *jacal*, equipped a horse, sprung into the saddle, and rode into a thicket, from which he could see the revelers as they galloped from the town. There he awaited developments.

Why he did not warn Little Lariat at once, could only be explained by his intense desire to prove his great regard and friendship for him, by battling for him and Bertha. This neglect also proved that Jose had great confidence in himself and Bert Benton being able to defeat the plans of Capitan Carajal.

CHAPTER III.

FOILED.

THE ball proved a success in many ways.

Little Lariat was naturally disappointed at not having seen more of the fascinating *Lollita*, and he had been besides anxious to have his sister invite her to the ranch. He could, however, gain no information in regard to her.

But he was destined soon to learn, to his great astonishment, that the seeming maiden was a youth, daring and skillful, and ready even to brave almost certain death in the service of himself and Bertha.

Away, in the moonlight, dashed the gay cavalcade; Bert and his sister in the midst of the

cavalry officers, and all talking and laughing joyously.

Jose Sanchez saw, from his covert, a Mexican lash his mustang at full speed down the government road, the moment the cavalcade left the town. He knew this man was a bandit spy, galloped to inform his leader that the Bentons had started for their ranch. This would necessitate a further advance by the bandits down the river, as they would not dare attempt the abduction while the officers were with Bertha.

Thus reasoned Jose, and he took notice that a dog trotted ahead of the horse of Little Lariat; a fact which gave him pleasure and relief; for he knew that the animal would probably catch scent of the lurking bandits, and warn its master and mistress of the danger ahead, thus preparing them for the conflict. Had not the youth overheard Carajal assert that Little Lariat was to be taken prisoner, and conveyed over the Rio Grande, he would doubtless have warned the young Texan of the presence of the bandits.

In addition to his personal motives, Jose Sanchez wished to prove that he was loyal to Texas, and an enemy to the outlaws of Cortina, who had many allies among the Mexican residents on the Texas side of the river.

After his friends had disappeared down the chaparral-bordered road, Jose urged his mustang, by well-known paths amid the thickets, in a course parallel with the road; aiming to keep near the followers of Cortina, after he had discovered their lurking-place. By a rapid gallop, he was enabled; as the road curved, to reach a point from which, upon halting, he could hear the rapid clatter of hoofs. This, he knew, proceeded from the animal ridden by the bandit spy.

Relieved in mind, he proceeded on, keeping as near the spy as possible, and not be in danger of discovery. Being on the opposite side of the road from the lurking-place of the ambushers, Jose was enabled to gain a point directly across from the bandits, without attracting their notice.

He was so near that he could hear the conversation of the outlaw Mexicans, and distinguish the voice of Capitan Carajal, who expressed the greatest satisfaction upon being informed of the approach of his intended victims. It was evident to Jose that the bandit chief did not believe the officers would accompany Bertha Benton and her brother that distance from the town.

Soon the youth heard the crashing of bushes, and to his surprise saw the outlaws all break from the thicket into the open road. This movement revealed to Jose the strength of the foes he expected to encounter. There were eight, exclusive of the captain, which was less than he had expected; but well he knew the slight chance there was for Little Lariat and himself to defeat them.

Upon the words that had been spoken by Carajal at Grande City, the boy greatly depended.

The outlaw chief had asserted that the Texan youth should be taken captive, and carried across the Bravo. They would then depend entirely upon their lassoos. This would give a decided advantage to the young ranchero and himself.

Jose, boy-like, was confident of success; yet, as the critical time drew near, he became greatly agitated; for he pondered upon the fearful consequences, and the remorse he would suffer should they succeed in even a part of their plan—that is, the capture of Bertha. Should this occur, it would be terrible; for he would be to blame, in not having warned the brother and sister of their danger.

Realizing that, should he harbor such thoughts, he would not be in a fit state to act with decision and skill, the youth braced himself, and became more resolute and determined.

Not long, was he fated to wait in impatience for the arrival of the intended victims of Capitan Carajal; for, around a curve of the road, now lying in the bright moonlight, ran the dog of Little Lariat. This was a wolfish-looking animal; without doubt a cross between a bloodhound and a mongrel cur.

Jose noticed that the dog seemed to catch the scent of the bandits. A low, threatening growl broke from the beast, and it cast its fiery eyes suspiciously at the bordering thickets.

Low, but deep curses of rage and surprise burst from the bandits, when they perceived the dog.

In a few moments more, Little Lariat and his sister, galloping side by side, dashed into view; the young ranchero scrutinizing the road ahead,

and keeping his revolver in hand and ready. Jose felt greatly relieved.

The sight was a beautiful one.

It appeared as though the youthful pair were suspicious of danger, for neither spoke to the other, and both gazed apprehensively ahead. The silvery moon played upon their faces, rendering Bertha more angelic in appearance than ever.

Jose Sanchez could hear the muttered admiration of Capitan Carajal, and he set hard his teeth, straining every nerve and muscle for the coming contest; his knife thrust loosely in his belt in front, and his trusty revolver clutched tightly, ready for use.

Thus, with tightly-drawn reins in his left hand, the Mexican youth remained; awaiting the moment for his action, while his brain seemed about to burst, and his heart to cease pulsation. The sight of the apparently doomed pair nearly drove the boy wild. But, he was not to endure it long.

The dog suddenly stopped, with a low and ominous growl, and gazed suspiciously into the dark shades to the right of the road—the very point at which lurked the outlaws, who were now frantic with fury at the prospect of their plot being thus foiled.

At once, Bert and Bertha jerked bridle-reins and halted. Both were instantly convinced that human foes lurked within the shades. They were speechless for the moment, each gazing ahead at the spot indicated by the dog. Then, in an instant, there was a startling transformation, and the silence as well was broken.

First, a wild and exultant yell, the signal for the bandits, was heard; and then, out shot the nine mustangs from the dense thickets, the carbines of the yellow-skinned riders exploding simultaneously!

Capitan Carajal urged his horse to the front of his miscreant followers, yelling:

"Lasses! Lasses! Ten doubloons to him who secures the golden-haired señorita!"

Hardly had the words left his lips when, with a fearful howl, the dog sprung up and caught the throat of the bandit leader's steed, causing the animal to rear and plunge back amid the others, with a shriek that was almost human.

Terrible curses filled the air.

Instantly, at the appearance of the outlaws, Little Lariat spurred his horse to the front of the animal of his sister, crying out, as he leveled his revolver:

"Stick close to me, Bertha, or you are lost! Don't flee, or you'll be captured!"

The maiden, almost paralyzed, clung tremblingly to her saddle. Her brother controlled his horse with difficulty, and taking quick aim with his revolver, pulled trigger. One of the miscreants threw his arms wildly in the air and fell over in the road, dead; his horse bounding down the trail in great fright. It looked dark for our friends.

Their one chance was to dash back toward the city by the road they had come.

This Little Lariat realized in an instant.

For himself, however, he resolved to stand his ground and sell his life dearly.

"Ride back to the town, Bertha!" he cried. "Ride at headlong speed the moment I fall, or you are lost!"

Again he fired, before the demoralized bandits could get into order with their lariats.

At this moment, out from the dark shadows on the north side of the road shot, with a shrill cheer, a youth in gayly-ornamented velvet costume, while his revolver belched fire and sent another outlaw to answer for his many crimes.

A fiendish yell broke from the remaining six bandits, a yell in which rage and hatred were blended, for they recognized Jose Sanchez as a fellow-countryman, and felt that his appearance on the scene might bring about their defeat if not destruction.

The Fates were seemingly against them.

Even Carajal felt that the situation was desperate, for he knew that his men could not be depended upon under such demoralizing circumstances. Too late he perceived that his order to prepare lassoes had been premature, for before the carbines could again be brought into use, down upon them dashed the two youths, side by side, with revolvers leveled, and belching fire at every bound of their steeds.

The infuriated captain succeeded, by sinking upon the neck of his horse, in not only avoiding instant death, but in dashing past his youthful assailants and gaining the side of the horrified Bertha. Her shriek of terror as he clutched her arm, drew the attention of the young avengers.

With yells, both urged their horses to the rescue, and Capitan Carajal, realizing that he

must escape at once or lose his life, spurred into the shades and crashed through the thorny thickets, hurling threats and curses of vengeance against Little Lariat and his friend, and vowing that he would yet capture Bertha Benton.

Thus were our young friends left masters of the situation, victors over the would-be abductors, and the beautiful young girl was safe.

"Ten thousand thanks, my friend, for your assistance!" cried out Little Lariat, as he leaned over in his saddle and grasped the hand of Jose impulsively.

"We owe you our liberty and perhaps our lives! But, I say, who are you? Have I not met you somewhere before?"

"I was Lollita, and enjoyed your society at the *danza*, while masquerading in female attire," answered the young Mexican. "But I am now, dressed as I should be, Jose Sanchez, at your service—your friend and your sister's friend to the death! I learned of this infamous plot, and followed the bandits to assist you—"

The young Texan was speechless with amazement and gratitude.

Not so was Bertha, however, for the sudden and almost miraculous change from such fearful danger to safety, acted as suddenly to recover her, and she extended her hand to the youthful Mexican, saying, in a silvery voice, expressive of deep emotion:

"Heaven bless you, Jose Sanchez! We must be friends always. We owe you our lives!"

Jose accompanied Bert and Bertha to the ranch, and after his departure Little Lariat saw no more of his friend until he caught a glimpse of his agony-contorted face as the brave young Mexican dangled in strangulation from the limb of the mesquite, to which he had been suspended, as we have seen, by Pecan Pete.

Thus was Little Lariat enabled to save the life of Jose Sanchez, who had so nobly risked it for him and Bertha; Pete, as it will be remembered, lowering his victim when the Greasers dashed down the bed of the wash-out.

CHAPTER IV.

WAR IN THE WASH-OUT.

"SUFFERIN' Moses! Pard Ned, I thought, dead sure, that this war our last chip-in fer ther game o' life; but thar warn't quite enough o' the yaller scum ter clean us out. Dang my heart, but we-uns air a hard pair ter buck ag'in! But we must kinder look arter thet boyee. Reckon he's bad hurted."

"Leetle Lariat slung his gab jist in ther kerrect time ter save ther young Greaser from ben' choked off'n this hyer yearth, an' I'm a han-kerin' ter know why in thunderation he didn't want ther yaller boyee hung up ter dry."

Thus spoke Pecan Pete, rattling off his words, as he panted with excitement, caused by the sudden surprise and the fight that followed.

He had sprung to the side of Nueces Ned, and the two had wasted not a bullet, nor had they sought shelter behind their horses, or covert in the thicket; notwithstanding the headlong charge of the Mexicans down upon Little Lariat, and which had brought them directly into the "open."

Ned felt greatly rejoiced that the execution had been prevented; the words of the Texan youth indicating that he had been correct in his opinion in regard to their captive.

"Who is Little Lariat, and where does he live?" Ned asked, as soon as he could recover himself; but his voice sounded so weak and strange, that Pete sprung toward him, exclaiming:

"Great Caesar, Ned! Ye're es white es a spook. Air yer hurted, boyee?"

"Not bad, I reckon, Pete," he answered, as he sunk to a sitting posture.

"Pull off my right boot," he said; "there must be a ball in my leg, although I did not know until a moment since that anything was wrong with me."

Pete complied with his pard's request, and emptied fully a pint of blood from the boot upon the sward.

"Ye're struck hard and deep, Ned, I reckon. I'll kinder 'zamine yer leg et onc't, an' stop thet bleedin', er yer'll wilt, dead sure."

"Don't mind me, Pete! I'll bind my sash around it. I'll be O. K. in a few minutes. Cut the captive loose, and attend to Little Lariat. The Greasers may take a notion to return, and then we'd be cleaned out, certain."

"By ther bleed o' ther Black-bean Braves, Ned, I doesn't 'low ter leave yer, even ter find out 'bout Leetle Lariat, ontel I sees yer hunky, yerself. I doesn't know whar he's located, an' never see'd ther leetle cuss afore; but I's hearn

tell a heap 'bout him, an' I reckon yeou hev too. He's laid out a power o' Greasers, I've bin tole, though he air sich a chicken."

"Thar, Ned, ye're O. K. ontel we-uns strikes Ringold Barracks. Ther bullet went plum through ther thick meat on yer thigh, but I doesn't believe hit'll bleed much more, fer I've boun' ther sash sorter tight."

As Pete ended, Ned remarked, feebly:

"Attend to the boys, pard! I'll be stronger in a short time."

"Reckon I'll do es yer says," agreed the old scout. "But, dang my heart ef I doesn't take a few o' ther yaller-bellies outen ther wet ef they've hurted Leetle Lariat bad! An' I won't fergit ther hole in yer leg, pard, when I gits another show ter draw bead on ther smoky-skinned coyotes. I'll go, but I'll keep my peepers skinned fer ther Mex' scum!"

Pete left Nueces Ned lying upon the green sward, and hastened to the edge of the wash-out, disappearing over the bank.

Had not the horses been tied securely to mesquite trees that grew on the margin of the "open," the animals would undoubtedly have stampeded, for they had been very much frightened during the short but tumultuous conflict.

It was just as Pete parted from Ned, that Jose Sanchez, who had been near death by strangulation, revived sufficiently to raise himself upon one elbow, and gaze around. He was in a dazed state, and his throat felt as though a hot wire was wound about it.

He was so bewildered that he could not, for the moment, recall the near past; but he caught a view of the old scout, as the latter went over the bank of the wash-out. He then became conscious that the rope still encircled his neck, although but loosely; and, with a shudder, the Mexican youth threw it over his head, as if it had been a loathsome serpent. Jose lay in the shade of the overhanging mesquite trees, but the "open" was comparatively light, there being still a ruddy glow in the western heavens.

Much to the boy's surprise, he discovered, as he cast the lariat away, a man lying upon the ground not far from him; and soon he recognized him as the one who had interceded in his behalf with Pecan Pete.

At once, the heart of Jose swelled with gratitude. He strove to cry out, but his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth.

It was little wonder, for as the youth gazed, forth from the dark shades there stole a blood-begrimed Mexican of most fiendish aspect, crawling upon hands and knees toward the unsuspecting and prostrate Nueces Ned.

The Greaser had evidently been wounded.

Ned also was wounded.

Jose could perceive that there had been a fight. Through that fight, it was probable, his life had been saved. But now, Pecan Pete would be more vengeful, more incensed against all Mexicans than ever. This time, he would doubtless hang him, and make sure work of it.

Yet, for all that, Jose thought not of escape. He would save the man who had believed in him.

Quickly the boy ran his hand around his belt, but his pistol and knife were gone.

Like a flash of light came the thought to him, that the lariat, which had so nearly been his own death, might serve to save the life of Nueces Ned. He did not remain long inactive, yet it seemed an age to him before he could overcome the almost paralyzing emotions born of the scene before him.

Ned was engaged in reloading his revolver, and the assassin was crawling toward his head as he lay; consequently the brave Texan would not know of his peril until the *cuchilla* of the Greaser was sheathed in his breast.

Instantly upon thinking of the lariat, Jose with great caution secured the same, and hastily adjusting the noose and coiling the slack, he arose to a half-bent position, the noose held in his right hand, and behind him, ready for casting; the slack hanging loosely over his left hand.

Life and death depended upon the slightest curve of wrist, or the slightest lack of force, and strength.

It was a fearful strain upon that frail Mexican youth.

Not a sound came from the wash-out.

It was evident that the assassin did not apprehend interference—did not know that living enemies were near at hand.

Jose had not made the slightest disturbance, and the creeping bandit had not perceived him. But, before the boy was ready for the cast of the deadly noose, upon which depended a human life, precious time had passed, and the hideous Mexican had ceased crawling. He was now

crouching, panther-like, for a spring upon his victim.

Jose Sanchez braced himself, straining sense and nerve.

The Greaser knew that the instant for action had arrived. Up in air shot his murderous knife, but at that moment, the deadly noose of the raw-hide rope cut the air with ominous hiss, and settled down, inclosing the uplifted arm and the head of the outlaw, just as the glittering steel was on its errand of death.

All the strength of little Jose was necessary to draw the noose tight, binding the arm and head of the struggling wretch.

And, while Ned raised himself and watched the struggle, in amazement, he saw the Mexican lad whom Pecan Pete had condemned to an ignominious death rush toward the writhing bandit, keeping the lariat stiff as, hand over hand, he neared his victim. Then Jose wrenched the knife from the marauder's hand, and buried the blade in its owner's breast!

A terrible shriek of agony and horror shot through the evening air. The hideous swarthy face of the outlaw contorted most fiendishly, while his form writhed, and his limbs thrashed upon the sward, his fingers clutching and tearing up the grass and flowers.

This was but for a few moments, during which the eyes of Ned and Jose were fixed upon the dying wretch. Then his form straightened outward, trembled, and quivered, and the death-rattle sounded in his throat.

The bandit had gone to answer for his crimes! Impulsively Nueces Ned stepped forward, his hand extended, and said:

"God bless you, my boy! I owe you my life, and I shall not forget it. Shake! We are pard hereafter!"

There was a light in the eyes of Jose Sanchez that spoke of intense joy and deep regard, as his hand was clasped by the young scout.

Then he spoke:

"Nueces Ned said kind words of Jose, when the rope of Pecan Pete was being tied to choke out his life. Jose Sanchez will never forget."

"Yes, but I ought to have prevented Pete from going any further than tying the rope. I believed you were square, Jose; but now, I'd stake my life—the life you have saved—on your being noble, brave, and loyal, if you are of Mexican birth. I feel that you can prove that you are worthy of Pecan Pete's confidence. You explained—"

Ned was here interrupted by a far-sounding yell, that came from the depths of the wash-out, and recognizing it as the danger-signal of his old pard, he cried out:

"Come, Jose! Pete and Little Lariat are in danger, if indeed the boy is alive!"

At the mention of Little Lariat's name the Mexican youth appeared to be struck dumb and motionless for a moment; but Nueces Ned had bounded, unmindful of his wound, toward the wash-out.

Catching sight of his revolver and knife on Pete's saddle, Jose secured them, and darted on after the young scout.

CHAPTER V.

PETE IS CONVINCED.

SEVERAL times since the attempted abduction of Bertha, and the capture of himself, had Little Lariat made a wide circuit of the ranch, in quest of any indication which would point to the presence of Carajal, or any of his desperate followers.

When, on the evening of the events recorded, he came unconsciously, in the "open," upon half a score of Mexican outlaws, the boy felt positive that they were the followers of the bandit captain, and that they were then on their way to attack the ranch. Before the startled Greasers could recover from their amazement, Little Lariat had whipped out his revolver, shot the two nearest him dead in their tracks, and then spurred on the back trail, into the chaparral.

But, as the horses of the marauders were more used to being pressed recklessly through the dense, thorny thickets than was Bert's favorite steed, the latter soon found himself hard pressed by his foes; when, as has been detailed, he discovered Jose Sanchez being hanged to the mesquite by Pecan Pete.

Little Lariat yelled out, and then, turning in his saddle, blazed away at the swarthy horde in his rear, intending to make a stand with the two Texans, and fight the Greasers to the bitter end. But, a moment after he pulled trigger, a bullet from an *escopeta* glanced along his head, tearing his scalp, and causing him to fall from his horse senseless, to the bed of the wash-out.

What immediately followed is already known.

Our next duty is to follow Pecan Pete.

The old scout, upon gazing down into the wash-out, could distinguish the form of the little ranchero; and he lost no time in letting himself down thorough bank, regardless of bruises, and a heavy shock as he struck the hard bed of the gully. Quickly bending beside the unconscious youth, Pete thrust his rough hand inside the woolen shirt, pressing his palm upon the left breast. Then, with a grunt of relief, he arose, and proceeded down the gully, to secure the boy's horse beyond the possibility of escape, and to procure the canteen of water, which, he had no doubt, was attached to the saddle.

He made the animal fast, speaking low and soothing words to quiet him; for, what Nueces Ned had said regarding the probable secret return of the surviving bandits occurred to him, and it seemed very reasonable, considering their vengeful nature.

Finding the canteen nearly full of water, as he had hoped, Pete returned to the side of Little Lariat, and proceeded to examine the wound of the youth. This, he soon saw, was not dangerous. He then bathed the head and face of the senseless lad for some time, but with little success, for Bert manifested no signs of recovery.

"Sufferin' Moses!" muttered Pecan Pete; "ther condemned chunk o' lead must ha' struck ormighty hard, and knocked ther leetle boyee's brain-box all out o' kilter. But I reckon on fotchin' him 'roun', O. K., bime-by."

"Purty lively circus we-'uns hed fer a fleetin' period, an' I'm worritated 'bout Ned; fer he war struck deep, an' lost a heap o' bleed. Wonder who in thunderation that young yaller-belly air, what I war 'bout ter choke off? Hit 'pears Leetle Lariat tumbled ter his figger-head, though hit war all twisted up wi' ther chokin' o' ther raw-hide."

"Mebbe so I made a leetle mistook, an' war too eager fer ter giv him a glide inter kingdom come; but hit's better ter be thet-a-way, than 'low ther scum ter stompede up an' down ther Grande, shootin' an' slashin' permisc-us-like."

"Better hang half-er-dozen squar' Texas Greasers, than 'low one r'arin', t'arin' cut-throat o' Cortina's ter skip through yer fingers, ter raise Tophit, an' break things giner'ly."

A slight quiver of the frame of Little Lariat caused Pecan Pete to end his soliloquy, and to throw more water over the youth's head.

But, while thus engaged the keen ears of the old scout detected a slight noise, which he believed was caused by the scraping of a man's foot upon the hard clay in the wash-out—this sound proceeding from the opposite side of the gully, and behind him.

With the quickness of thought Pete sprang to his feet, and turned to face the danger, at the same time jerking his knife, and making an effort to draw his revolver with the other hand; but the canteen-strap, which he still clutched, became wound about the scabbard and butt of the pistol by the quick movement, and he was thus prevented from drawing the weapon.

At the same moment, his warning yell, which had alarmed Ned and Jose, burst forth; and with good and sufficient reason, as was the peculiar intonation of the same, which meant that he was in need of help. So his pard understood it, and though wounded, and weak from the loss of blood, rushed, as recorded, to the point of alarm.

The discovery made by Pecan Pete, as he sprang up from the side of Little Lariat, was well calculated to cause the old scout the utmost alarm and no little surprise. Down toward him, skulking along the west bank of the deep gully, where it was most in shade, were four of the Greasers, who had escaped death in their dash after Little Lariat into the camp of the two Texans.

Each held his long, glittering knife, their black eyes flashing with a murderous thirst for blood and revenge, and their muscles strained for tiger-like bounds upon the single Texan, who had laid many of their comrades low in death.

Pecan Pete, under ordinary circumstances, would have laughed and yelled, and exhibited the most reckless and even careless actions; but the fact that the brave and handsome youth—who was daring and brave to a fault, and who doubtless had those who would be filled with bitter anguish at his death—the consciousness that Little Lariat lay senseless in the gully near him, this transformed the old scout into a veritable Hercules in strength, and fired him with action that was rapid as thought itself.

Pete had been greatly surprised and startled at the discovery of foes, but little more so than

were the Greasers upon the sudden bounding of their intended victim to his feet, and the furious and determined appearance made by him, with huge bowie in hand.

The Mexicans had counted upon an easy victory, thinking they could bound upon and slay the scout without risk to themselves; but in this they found they had reckoned without their host.

At the time of which we are speaking, a Mexican would run great risks, and part with his all, to become the owner of a Colt's revolver; and they believed themselves invincible when these arms were buckled about their waists. There is little doubt, therefore, that the return of the bandits was due as much to the desire to secure the "six-shooters" of our friends as to avenge their comrades.

The dauntless front of Pecan Pete dumfounded the outlaws; but, instantly realizing that they must render the Texan powerless before he could draw his revolver, or they would fall before his deadly aim, all, with a vengeful yell, sprung with uplifted knives toward him.

But, once more were the swarthy miscreants made to hesitate, even halting in fear and astonishment; for, like a madman, Pecan Pete sprang, panther-like, to meet them.

However, they could not retreat.

To turn, and flee up the gully, would only be to fall as they ran; consequently, they moved warily to meet the daring old scout, who, the next moment, hurled himself upon them, slashing the knife-arm of the first Greaser he closed with, forcing the ruffian to drop his weapon, and then burying his bowie in the bandit's breast!

A low, gurgling moan followed, and then, with a sickening sound the outlaw fell to the earth, there to quiver, and gasp out his last breath.

At that instant, Nueces Ned grasped a strong branch, and partly supported by the same, slid down the steep bank to the assistance of his pard; and, just in the nick of time to prevent one of the Greasers, who had bounded to the side of Little Lariat—as the latter, upon recovery, raised himself upon his elbows, viewing the startling scene—from plunging a knife into the young ranchero's breast.

The poor boy was in a dazed condition.

He knew not whether he was gazing at a real scene, or some picture of his imagination; consequently he was not in a state to be of assistance to himself or any one else.

And Nueces Ned was far from being able to cope with the desperate Greaser, for he was weak from the loss of blood, and his descent into the gully had caused his wound to open, and bleed again profusely.

The bandit seemed to perceive at once the true state of affairs, and to realize that he had the game in his own hands—that the life of the young ranchero, and that of the wounded Texan, were in his power—for he gave out an exultant yell, as his knife clashed against the blade of Ned, whose tremendous arm strove feebly to guard his breast from the *cuchillo* of the marauder. Meanwhile, Pecan Pete was desperately battling with the two others, one of whom he had succeeded in wounding.

A minute more would have terminated the lives of both Nueces Ned and Little Lariat, without doubt, as the former reeled in his tracks, and it was only by the greatest exertion of his powerful will that he kept his feet.

But, at this critical moment, Jose Sanchez sprang, in one wild and desperate bound, from the bank of the gully, his boot-heels pointed true, and striking directly upon the head of the bandit, whose murderous knife was, at that moment, being thrust with great force through the guard of the young scout.

The outlaw dropped like a log, as if shot through the brain, Ned sinking to the earth at the same time, his head falling upon Little Lariat, who was probably the most horrified mortal on earth.

As a matter of course, Jose fell prostrate with the bandit he had jumped upon, but the Mexican youth sprang at once to his feet, and plunged his knife into the senseless outlaw, thus ending his career of crime.

One glance revealed to Jose that his work was not complete—that Pecan Pete, who so recently had knotted the deadly noose about his neck, and jerked him up a limb, was now greatly in need of assistance.

Believing that Ned and Little Lariat were safe for the present, Jose darted to the help of the old scout.

The latter had succeeded in slaying one of his foes, but, while giving him the finishing stroke, the other, and last of the revenge-seek-

ing quartette, had grappled with him, and stabbed him in the shoulder.

Pete was now nearly exhausted.

Thus it was that the Mexican youth discovered him struggling, and at once bounded to the help of the man who had so recently acted as his would-be executioner.

The strength of the old scout was now nearly gone, and he was covered with blood from his wound. Neither he nor the bandit could use their knives, as each clutched the wrist of the other. But Pete well knew that he could not long resist—that he was doomed unless rescued; and he had no hope of help, as he believed that Ned was not able to come to his assistance, or he would have done so.

He knew nothing of the descent of Jose and Ned into the gully, for his attention had been every instant occupied in the defensive and on the aggressive. He knew that one of the outlaws still remained unharmed, and felt that the missing Greaser might be murdering Little Lariat.

Perhaps it was this belief, suddenly flashing upon Pete's mind, that caused him to make a last and desperate effort to throw off the embrace of his yellow-skinned foe, regain the use of his right arm, and end the conflict. He made one grand attempt, and failed!

The blade of the bandit flashed in the air, and but for the timely arrival of little Jose would have done its deadly work.

One quick effort, in which the boy spent all his strength, forced the Greaser over backward, Jose holding him fast, while the wretch cursed like a fiend. The youth cried out:

"Up, and strike, Pecan!"

The old scout recognized his preserver, and was astounded. But there was no time for wonder or speculation. Pete knew that the boy was flesh and blood, or he could not hold that fierce marauder as he did. He also knew that he could hold him but a short time.

Immediate action was necessary.

Pecan Pete had no words at such a moment, but dealing his foe the fatal blow broke the spell, and he ejaculated:

"Sufferin' Moses!"

Then, while the writhing bandit was thrown aside, the old scout thrust out his hand to Jose, saying, as the latter seized it:

"Dang my ole heart, ef 'Ned war'n't ker-rect! Boyee, ye're white in actions, ef yer skin air yaller. I'm ornighly sorry fer tryin' ter choke yer off'm this hyer yearth. I sw'ar I air, by the bleed o' Crockett!"

CHAPTER VI.

ALL QUIET ALONG THE LINE.

BUT Jose Sanchez waited not to listen to the words of the old scout. He had, when he sprung down upon the head of the bandit, caught a glimpse of Little Lariat, whose presence in such a place was a great mystery, and whose sad condition was also one that called for instant solution.

Not only this, but Jose had news of great importance for his friend—of much more importance and moment now that the bandits' presence had become known to him. Indeed, no sooner was the last Greaser slain, than the Mexican youth became almost wild with concern and excitement, although the cause for such emotions had seemingly been removed, as far as was possible.

To be sure, all were wounded more or less dangerously, for Jose had himself received a stab in the arm.

However, the worry and apprehension of the brave boy, who had performed such daring deeds, and to whom each one present owed his life, was not occasioned by thoughts of the present condition, or possible danger, of those in whose company he had so strangely fallen.

But this will be explained as we proceed.

Jose left the side of Pete and ran to Little Lariat. He realized that this was no time for talk, but action, and he asked:

"What called Little Lariat from his ranch? When were you at home, and are you badly hurt? I see Ned needs my help. You can talk, while I dress his wound."

"All right, Jose. But how came you to be in this locality? As to the ranch, it seems like a month since I have been home. I think I have been asleep. I believe I dreamed that you were hanging, and that I cut you down."

"The dence has been to pay all around here, and I'm somewhat mixed up. I'll get over this muddle soon, I hope. As to Ned, as you call that man, I never saw him before. There is another stranger, by the way."

"Are the chaparrals full of fighters, white and yellow? Has Cortina invaded the State?"

Boys, explain matters, or I'll go off the handle, as the old women say!"

Pecan Pete had staggered up to the trio, just previous to Little Lariat's closing remark.

Jose was attending to the unconscious Ned.

Pete stood, in a bewildered state, gazing first at one and then another of those before him, in much the same manner as would a man in an advanced stage of inebriation.

Near at hand lay the four blood-stained bodies of the Mexican bandits; the moon, which had become bright and silvery as the glory of the sun had vanished, showering down its soft, weird light upon the strange and tragic scene, which, with the actions and manner of Pecan Pete and Jose Sanchez, was not calculated to clear the sadly muddled brain of Little Lariat. Before Nueces Ned had been brought back to consciousness, Pete had sunk to a sitting posture, having, it was evident, stood erect as long as it had been possible in his condition.

Had a couple of their foes come upon them then, the death of all four would have been easily accomplished.

Without a word, the Mexican youth transferred his attentions from Ned to Pete; the latter submitting, in bewilderment and surprise, but keeping keen watch of the boy as though he half-expected those ministrations to be changed at any moment to a murderous assault, against which he could not hope to combat.

Nueces Ned with some difficulty arose to a sitting posture, and gazed first at Little Lariat and then at Pecan Pete. A look and expression of great relief was instantly manifested when he saw that his old pard still lived.

For a full minute the three gazed from one to another, Jose paying strict attention to the wound of the old scout. Then Ned, Pete and Little Lariat burst into loud laughter simultaneously.

No wonder was it that the young Mexican turned and looked at them in astonishment.

Had they become suddenly insane?

The state they had for some time been in favored such a conclusion.

An observer would have decided that all except Jose were good subjects for a hospital, and that strait-jackets would not have been much out of place.

"Gentlemen," said Little Lariat, at last, "I begin to corral my scattered thoughts, and I believe you have had a he old fight on my account. If I mistake not, I led a crowd of Greaser cut-throats right into your camp. I beg your pardon, and am sorry you have received wounds on my account. I hope I may be of service to you in the future. For the present, you have my thanks and deep gratitude!"

"Sufferin' Moses! Ye're clean off ther trail, leetle pard!" burst out Pecan Pete, with an energy that astonished his hearers; "yer jist done Ned an' me tler bestest favor yer c'u'd ha' run in onter we-uns. Why, I war so bad off, hankerin' ter gi'n a Greaser a send-off, thet I bucked ag'in' Ned's vardict an' war mighty nigh hangin' this white Mex' boyee. Fact air, he'd bin a goner, ef yer hedn't glided in jist when yer did."

"Great Crockett! Ef this hyer leetle Mex' hed bin choked ter death fer sart'in by me, I'd never gut over hit, arter findin' out he war squar'. Why, boyees, he jist lunged in an' saved my gizzard from gittin' split by thet last yaller-belly I war hitched onter fer good. Who in thunderation air yer, leetle one?"

"He's Jose Sanchez—my pard," spoke up Little Lariat, "and a week ago he saved me and my sister Bertha from being captured by Capitan Carajal and his gang."

At the mention of Bertha, Jose groaned.

Pete started, and stared at the youth, asking anxiously, while the others looked at him with solicitude and concern.

"Air yer hurted, boyee, an' never hes said a word, but kept on 'tendin' ter we-uns? Now, dang me, ef I doesn't 'tend ter yeou!"

"Come here, pard Jose," said Little Lariat; "why did you not say you were wounded?"

Jose, however, had not groaned on account of his wound, but he allowed them to think that such was the case.

The thoughts of the Mexican boy were of the danger of Bertha Benton from the vengeance of Capitan Carajal; for he felt assured that the bandits who had pursued Little Lariat were a portion of Carajal's command, and that they had crossed the Rio Grande for the purpose of capturing Bertha, her mother and brother, and then burning the ranch.

He did not think it prudent, however, to reveal the knowledge he possessed, as the Texans might endanger their lives by at once speeding

to the ranch before they were able on account of their wounds to sit their saddles with safety. Jose kept silent, but Ned spoke:

"Now you have got through, pards, I will have my say. I told you, Pete, that this was an honest, square boy, and that you ought to give him a chance to prove his assertions. You have seen what he has done. Now I will add my testimony."

"I was at the mercy of one of the bandits, when Jose sprung from the bank of the wash-out upon the miscreant's head, thus saving my life, and also the life of Little Lariat. So you see he has saved every one of us, and that after having been strung up by you, Pete, while I stood by without insisting upon his having an opportunity to prove that he had important information for the owner of the next ranch."

"What!" exclaimed Little Lariat. "Why, the next ranch is my home. What news have you, Jose? Out with it, boy!"

"I have not been to the Benton ranch," asserted the young Mexican, striving to control himself. "I know of nothing wrong there. Was it strange that I should speak thus when my life was in danger? I knew if they took me to the ranch that Little Lariat would be my friend, and I should not be hanged."

These words relieved Bert's mind greatly, still he was not without some anxiety in regard to the safety of his mother and sister.

The presence of the bandits caused him much apprehension, and at length he said:

"Pards, my home is free to you, and I wish you all to ride to the ranch to-morrow morning. As it is, you must rest here to-night, but I don't think we are in danger of another attack. But my wound is a mere scratch, and I shall mount and away at once. My mother and sister may be in danger."

"Reckon we-uns hed all better glide thet-away," proposed Pecan Pete; "fer we're good fer a few Greasers yit, ef ther cantankerous cusses hev run in on ther ranch, an' corraled ther caliker."

"Little Lariat rides not alone," said Jose, decidedly. "I will go with him to the ranch. Senor Pete and Senor Ned may stay here. When morning comes, I will ride fast here, and guide them to the ranch."

"Yes, gentlemen," said Little Lariat, "that will be the best way. I will not object to Jose's company, if you two can get along without him."

"Boyees, git up an' git, ef yer worritated. Ned an' me 'll lay low hyer until sun-up. Thet's ther bestest p'ogramme. Fact air, I hain't gut vim enough left ter buck ag'in' a cotton-tail rabbit; an' that's 'bout ther fix o' Ned, I reckon. Ain't hit, pard?"

"That's about the way I feel, Pete; and, if you think best, we'll remain here."

Having thus decided, Little Lariat led his horse up the wash-out, the others following slowly. Jose assisted Pete and Ned until the gully became shallow; then they left it, and returned to their camp, the horses and equipments being removed to an "open" not far distant. A couch of blankets was formed by Jose, in a thicket, for Ned and Pete. Then, after furnishing them with food and water, he left them to pass the night together, side by side.

After hearty farewells, Jose and Little Lariat mounted their mustangs, and rode slowly toward the northwest, in the direction of the home of the young ranchero.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ATTACK ON THE RANCH.

ABOUT the same time that Little Lariat dashed down the wash-out, pursued by the bandits, who fell before the revolvers and bowies of our Texan friends, a score of murderous-looking Mexicans, led by Capitan Carajal, approached the "open" in which was located the ranch of the Bentons.

A more depraved and fiendish party of horse-men were seldom seen together; and the face of their leader was stamped with every evil passion, his serpent-like eyes darting eager glances through the chaparral on all sides, suspicion in his every expression.

Soon he jerked his mustang to a halt, and alighted, with a gesture of command and a hiss of caution that caused his followers to dismount also. He then secured his steed to the stem of a mesquite, and stole silently forward; first bidding his men remain as they were.

But a few paces had he gone, when an ejaculation of the most intense satisfaction escaped him. Situated in the middle of a natural "open," was a dwelling, far better in appearance than the frontier houses in general; being

constructed of sawed timbers and boards, with glass windows, and a neat gothic veranda.

The house was almost literally covered with vines. The roof was but slightly sloping, and there was a smaller building in the rear, which was used as a kitchen.

To the further side of the "open," which was some three acres in extent, could be seen several corrales constructed with mesquite pickets, some eight feet in height, and set closely in the earth in an upright position.

Seated upon the front veranda, in a large rocking-chair, was a lady of some forty years of age, still beautiful, but whose face was marked with lines of care and grief.

She was engaged in reading a book of poems, and at times gazing toward the gorgeous sunset, and then at another form near her. It was that of a maiden of surpassing, refined, and almost angelic beauty—none other than Bertha Benton, who has already been introduced to the reader.

The lady in the chair, we need hardly say, was Mrs. Benton, the widowed owner of the ranch, and mother of Bert and Bertha.

The latter was now pacing back and forth on the veranda, and like her mother was gazing with admiration at the red sun, the lower disk of which seemed resting on the top of the wide-spreading ocean of chaparral, as if reluctant to lose sight of that little flower-bordered home.

But, at times, the fair face of Bertha Benton showed signs of deep concern, and she gazed around the borders of the "open," at the different points where ingress and egress between the dense thickets of thorns was possible.

"I wonder why Bert doesn't return?" she at length exclaimed, betraying more of anxiety in her voice than had been shown in her face. "Mother, do you not feel worried in regard to Bert's prolonged absence?"

"I think our boy is rather late," answered Mrs. Benton; who, however, seemed anxious, on her daughter's account, not to betray too much apprehension. "But he has often remained away all night, you know. Sometimes he is obliged to follow stray cattle such a distance that it is impossible for him to reach home."

"But, mother, I know Bert has not gone out to-day to search for stock. Of late he has been looking for signs of Mexican bandits, and with good reasons. Carajal is not one to forget, and it is but a week since he was foiled in his attempt to capture my brother and myself."

"Since your father's tragic death," was Mrs. Benton's reply, "I can never hear those Mexican invaders mentioned without my blood chilling. I do wish that we could dispose of our ranch, even for half its value, and seek a home where we would be safe from the murderous bandits of the Rio Grande."

"Bertha, I dread the coming night, for I have all day felt a presentiment of evil. It is coming now," she exclaimed suddenly, "I am positive of it! There is no wind, not even the usual evening breeze, yet I have been watching the chaparral directly in front of our home, and I have observed the tops of the mesquites shaking violently at several points."

"My darling, there are certainly men in the chaparral, who have secured their horses to the trees, and are now crouching in hiding! Do not exhibit alarm, I beg of you! Oh, where is my son?"

The fair girl trembled with dread at the first words of alarm spoken by her parent; but she controlled herself bravely, and betrayed her fear in no other way.

Walking carelessly into the house, she flew from window to window, and closed the heavy oaken shutters, barring the same. Then, before she went again to the veranda, she took down from their place two double-barreled shotguns, and a pair of revolvers—the last mentioned being in holsters which were attached to belts. The guns she loaded quickly and dexterously, with heavy charges of buckshot.

Buckling one of the six-shooters around her waist, Bertha placed the other with the guns upon the table; securing some matches and candles, which she left where she could place her hands upon them in the darkness. This done, she went to the front door, and said hurriedly:

"All is secure, mother, except in front. Come in at once, and we will close and bar the door. Then you can attend to the east room, and I will the west. But, oh! where can Bert be? Mother, this is terrible!"

"Be brave, my child! We shall gain nothing by allowing our terror to rule us. Just the opposite, for everything depends upon being calm and firm. Now, to act!"

As she thus spoke, Mrs. Benton sprung from her chair, through the doorway, and slammed

the door; Bertha placing the heavy bars in position. Then each ran quickly to the rooms fronting on the veranda on either side of the hall.

But, barely had the first shutters been closed, when a series of terrific yells rung on the evening air—yells of baffled rage and vengeful meaning.

Ere the last windows were barred, the mother and daughter had caught sight of the brutal marauders, as they spurred headlong toward the dwelling, trampling into the earth the beautiful flowers that surrounded it.

The maiden could hardly repress a shriek, as she recognized in the leader of the band none other than Capitan Carajal!

Never could that fiendish face be forgotten.

For a moment, Bertha and her mother stood, in the dense darkness of their abode, unable to speak or move; while the tramp of many hoofs, and loud curses and threats were heard upon every side of the dwelling.

"Come, mother dear," said the girl, in a strange voice; "do not give way to fear! I'll light some candles at once, and then we will show these outlaws that it is not so easy a matter to capture us as they think."

"I can shoot with some effect, I believe. If we can keep the fiends off for a while, Bert may arrive with assistance. He may hear our guns, you know. Come, mother, be brave!"

"I will try, Bertha. I know you can shoot, dear; and so can I, if my nerves will only become firm. I hope my son will not return alone while the bandits are here. If he does, he will be killed."

Mrs. Benton seemed to think that she could maintain her firmness by talking, but her daughter noticed not her words, but grasped a gun at once, and hastened to the side of the room, where she turned a wooden button, allowing a portion of the planking to be opened inward, thus revealing a loop-hole.

The yells of the bandits were, by this time, terrific, and they pounded the doors with clubs; but as Bertha could discover no foes from her position, she hastened to the rear door, which was likewise furnished with a small, movable trap. Through this the brave girl thrust her gun, both hammers being cocked, and instantly pulled trigger.

Fearful were the groans and yells that followed, for the maiden had put in heavy loads. From the ejaculations of the outlaws, she knew that she had slain more than one of the miscreants, besides wounding several.

Pale as death, she gave one glance at her mother, and then, with forced calmness, proceeded to reload the gun.

The eyes of Mrs. Benton were fixed and staring as she listened, in horror and dread, to the awful sounds so near them. At times she fancied she could hear the defiant taunting and vengeful yell of that brave and daring boy, Little Lariat.

Both mother and daughter well knew, by the vengeful yells of the bandits, that some desperate attempt would be made to break into the dwelling. They had little hope of being able to prevent them, for any length of time, from breaking down the doors.

"Mother," cried out Bertha, frantically, "shoot, even if at the empty air! We may by the sound of our guns draw help to the ranch. Remember they are merciless demons, and that a fate worse than death awaits us if taken captive!"

These words seemed to nerve the poor woman to a stern resolution; for she walked quickly to one of the east windows, and thrust her gun through the loop-hole. At once she caught a glance of several Greasers, carrying a long, heavy pole. This, she felt sure, was to be used in breaking in the door.

At sight of the bandits she recalled the base murder of her husband, and the thought banished the aversion she had felt to shedding human blood. Carefully she aimed at these men, and pulled both triggers at once.

The sounds that followed were terrific.

Above the loud shrieks and curses rung the frantic command of Carajal, who was furious at the unexpected defense made by the women, and the killing and wounding of so many of his band.

In his previous attempt to abduct Bertha Benton, his whole party with one exception had been slain; besides he had gained no knowledge of some half a score more, whom he had ordered on in advance, to capture Little Lariat, if the latter could be found anywhere on the range. Had he known that every one of these now lay dead, his fury would have been doubled.

To add to the madness of the bandit chief, he realized that the reports of the guns might,

at any moment draw avenging Texans to the ranch.

These reflections, as he viewed his dead and wounded around him, rendered Capitan Carajal insane with desperation; and no sooner had the men who bore the pole been killed or wounded, than he ordered others to grasp it, and to hurl it against the door before the women could reload. But Bertha overheard him.

Catching her mother by the arm, she cried out:

"Be brave now, or we are lost! All the bandits are at the rear. We are no longer safe. We must escape, through the front entrance, to the chaparral. Come on, mother dear, or we are doomed!"

Buckling the extra revolver about her mother's waist, Bertha urged her through the hall, and quickly removed the bars of the front door. Passing out, they reclosed it, and both stood before the veranda, breathless, and pale as death.

Not an outlaw was now to be seen, to bar their way; and, without a word, the affrighted mother and daughter ran, hand in hand, as they had never run before, toward the friendly shade of the chaparral.

But the crash of the pole, and the shattering of the rear door, sounded in their ears, before they had gone ten paces from the veranda.

CHAPTER VIII. IN THE TOILS.

BERTHA and her mother had not gone half the distance between their house and the chaparral when the latter turned, and with a hunted and helpless look, gazed into her daughter's face but without a word.

"Oh, mother!" cried the poor girl, in an agony of apprehension. "What is the matter? Can you not keep up your strength until we reach the thicket?"

By a great effort of will, Mrs. Benton threw off, in a measure, the paralyzing feelings that ruled her; and, in a hoarse whisper, exclaimed, as she pushed Bertha forward:

"Fly, my darling, fly! Save yourself! I can no longer exert myself. My heart is breaking. Heaven help us, Bertha! Oh, what has become of my poor boy?"

The poor woman staggered on feebly, as she thus spoke, and her daughter saw plainly that she could proceed no faster.

They must, then, be discovered and captured; for the noble girl had not, of course, a thought of abandoning her mother, to seek safety for herself. The picture that she now presented was even grander than the one in which she was seen so heroically defending their dwelling against such fearful odds.

Knowing the dread doom that awaited her, it was marvelous that she could maintain such firmness.

Had she been alone, or with any other than her mother, she would doubtless have sunk to the ground in despair. But that mother, whom she so fondly loved, was in the same fearful peril as herself, and this fact nerved the maiden to a course that was unaccountable to herself, and which she maintained until her parent's strength at last gave entirely out.

Quickly Bertie jerked her revolver, cocked the weapon, and springing behind her mother, faced their home; walking backward thus, with leveled pistol, as she said, in a strange and unnatural voice:

"Pass on, mother, dear; pass on to the shades, at as fast a pace as you can! These demons shall not harm you, or capture either of us. I will shoot them down as fast as they come upon us!"

Passively Mrs. Benton obeyed. Indeed she had not the strength of will or body to do anything but comply with Bertha's request. She seemed to have become almost apathetic, through despair and agony of mind, from the moment she had been obliged to pause in the midst of her flight.

But, who can imagine the awful strain upon poor Bertha, as she slowly paced backward, in the manner described, gazing at the home she so loved, and within which now was a pillaging horde of miscreants? She could hear a terrible din within the dwelling, the crashing of furniture and glass, and the tramping of men all over the house.

She looked fixedly at the front door, through which her mother and herself had escaped, expecting to see it broken open, and the swarthy ruffians spur forth in a mad mob.

It would have been torture to any one not entirely heartless, to have gazed into Bertha Benton's face at that time. So terrible was the suspense to her, that it would really have been

a relief to have seen the door open, and the outlaw Greasers rush wildly toward her.

But this suspense was not to be of long continuance.

The bandits soon searched the house, but without success. Then, knowing their intended victims could not have escaped, except by the front of the dwelling, they examined the door, found it unbarred, and opened it. Then they discovered, not far from the dwelling, the pair who had caused them so much trouble, as well as causing the death of so many of their comrades.

The yell that burst from the outlaws, upon seeing Mrs. Benton and her daughter, made the very hearts of the hunted women cease pulsation.

They knew that their doom was sealed!

All hope was now banished.

They were lost!

And poor Little Lariat?

His coming home would be terrible indeed!

At the orders of Capitan Carajal, the mustangs were at once brought around, and all mounted.

Only the most exultant yells were now heard.

All galloped madly toward the two fugitives, some speeding between them and the line of thickets; thus cutting off escape, and not only that, but preventing Bertha from being able to defend her mother except from one point, and then she could be captured from the rear without trouble.

This the poor girl perceived, and she whirled around, crying out:

"Stand still, mother, and if possible, defend yourself with your revolver! Help may come at any moment."

But poor Mrs. Benton was totally unfit to act upon this suggestion.

"Stand back, cowards!" yelled Bertha, her eyes flashing, as she took aim at a galloping Mexican who rode directly toward her.

At once she pulled trigger.

Up into the air shot the arms of the outlaw, a horrible shriek of mingled agony and terror bursting from his lips as he fell from his horse, a corpse.

A furious yell broke from all, and the next instant a dozen lassoes hissed through the air, many nooses encircling the forms of both mother and daughter, who were thus bound together in a most torturing manner.

Carajal sprang from his saddle, jerked the revolver from Bertha, and bade a number of his followers loosen the lariats. This the murderously inclined ruffians obeyed with evident reluctance, they undoubtedly wishing to drag the women to death.

Mrs. Benton and Bertha were bound to the saddles of two of the horses whose owners had lost their lives, and all returned to the ranch.

The bandit leader knew that he must give his followers unbounded license, in connection with the pillaging of the ranch and corrals, and also allow them to burn the home of Little Lariat; otherwise he would have serious trouble with them, and the captives would be in danger of death. He, therefore, gave them permission to secure to the saddles of the riderless steeds whatever plunder they wished, and also to pack all animals found in the corrals. First, however, he gave orders that the slain should be buried. This was quickly done, for they all knew that every moment of delay was attended with great danger.

For a short time great confusion and no little contention ruled, as the valuables were being taken from the dwelling.

Poor Bertha had broken down the moment the lassoes encircled her so cruelly; for at that moment all hope fled, and the darkest despair ruled her heart and brain.

To be at the mercy of that horde of murderous bandits was indeed terrible, but that her mother was forced to witness the destruction of her home was tenfold more so. No longer did she wish that Little Lariat would arrive, for well she knew that the reckless youth, even were he to come with a force sufficiently strong to cope with the followers of Capitan Carajal successfully, would, at the sight of his mother and sister, rush madly to their rescue, and meet almost certain death.

And besides, it was far from probable that Bert would have any help with him, should he arrive before the departure of Carajal, for the boy could have no knowledge of the presence of the bandits.

If her brother did come, it would be to meet death; and then there would be no hope of their being rescued.

Bertha had great confidence in Bert, although she entertained no hope on his account, for

there seemed no grounds to base such hope upon.

Hence it will be seen that the maiden was in a most agonized state of mind; indeed, it was a marvel that she retained sense and reason.

As for poor Mrs. Benton, she seemed to have been mercifully benumbed in brain after the first gush of tears at sight of the spoliation of her home; she relapsing into a lethargic state deeper than previously, and thus adding to the anguish of her daughter.

After all the valuables had been secured, Carajal ordered the corrals and dwelling to be given to the torch; but he regretted having done this mad act when it was too late, for so infuriated had he been at the slaying of his men, and so excited and maddened at not having at once secured the women, that he had lost his judgment.

No sooner had the flames burst forth than he realized that it would be next to impossible for him to cross the Rio Grande at either the ford above or below, as the light from the conflagration would cause the fords to be watched by the Texans.

However, this very fact, together with another which he thought of, determined the bandit chief upon a far different course from that which he had intended to take.

The troops and the Texans would suppose, without any doubt, that he would retreat directly toward the fords, avoiding as far as was possible the main Government roads. Consequently, they would beat the chaparrals along the river in search of him, keeping the main force in waiting near Rio Grande City. He, therefore, determined to pass out from the "open" in which the ranch was now burning, on the north side; and then, by cattle-paths, proceed down the river, remaining in hiding until the searchers should come to the conclusion that he had crossed the Rio Grande before they had gotten their forces stationed.

Having thus decided, he informed his men; and in riding singly, each leading a horse loaded with the plunder—the animals upon which the captives were bound being secured to the tails of others in front of them—the line, led by Capitan Carajal, disappeared among the chaparral, following cow-paths and unconsciously proceeding directly toward the scene of the conflict between the other portion of their raiding-party and those of whom they had been in search; the band who had met their total destruction at the hands of Pecan Pete, Nueces Ned, Jose Sanchez and Little Lariat.

CHAPTER IX.

LITTLE LARIAT TOO LATE.

JOSE SANCHEZ, previous to the start from the point where Pete and Ned had decided to remain for the night, had bound about the wounded head of Little Lariat a handkerchief well saturated with water, into which had been poured a small quantity of brandy which Nueces Ned had in his saddle-bags. Consequently, the young ranchero had not gone far when he began to feel more like himself, and to wish to travel faster. He, therefore, spurred at a short lope; Jose keeping close beside his Texan pard.

Both were too much concerned and apprehensive in regard to the presence of the bandits on the Texan side of the river, and so near to Benton Ranch, to care about conversing, except in the way of occasional short questions and answers. At length, however, the young Mexican unburdened his mind in connection with his presence down the river, which had resulted in his capture by Ned and Pete, and nearly in his being hanged.

The youth acknowledged that he had, to a certain extent, spoken falsely before leaving the gully, as he did not wish to needlessly alarm Little Lariat, or cause the other two Texans to mount, in their wounded state, and ride to the ranch.

Jose revealed the fact that he had, since the attempt of Carajal to abduct Bertha and capture his Texan pard, been very much concerned in regard to the safety of the females at Benton Ranch, and the ranch itself.

Knowing the perfidy and revengeful nature of Carajal and his followers, Jose asserted that he had no doubt the bandit chief would soon attempt once more to abduct Bertha, and have revenge for the lives of the men he had lost in his first and unsuccessful attempt. He had, therefore, made up his mind, after having left the hospitable home of his Texan friends, to go as a spy into the outlaw stronghold in Mexico, disguised as a girl, and in that way satisfy himself as to the intentions of Carajal.

This he had done, and ascertained that the bandit leader had planned another raid, with a

force of over thirty men; ten or twelve of whom were to be dispatched ahead of the others, for the purpose of searching for and capturing Little Lariat when he was on the range, riding after cattle.

Jose had hastened to cross the river, but had been, when in Mexico, forced to secrete himself during one entire day. This had delayed him, and he had been on his way to inform his Texan pard of the intended raid of Capitan Carajal, when he had been captured by Pecan Pete, as a suspicious character, and believed by the scout to be a spy of Cortina.

When he had recovered, after the interrupted hanging, and ascertained that a party of bandits had chased Little Lariat into the camp of Pete and Ned, the boy then concluded that these outlaws had been the advance party of Carajal's raiding expedition, and that the main portion of the band would soon be at Benton Ranch.

However, events and circumstances had so occurred that it had been made impossible for any of them to hasten to the ranch until he and Bert had started.

The latter, as may be supposed, listened to these explanations of Jose with intense interest, and in an agony of apprehension; both at once spurring on at headlong speed, as the youthful Mexican had finished.

But, not many yards had they galloped, when they jerked their horses to haunches, and from the lips of Little Lariat burst language that would have filled any listener with pity, consideration, and compassion.

"God in Heaven! My home is on fire! Jose, the outlaws have begun their work. My poor mother and sister—on, Jose, on! Their lives may depend upon a moment's time!"

"It is that *diablo*, Carajal!" exclaimed Jose.

"Spur, pard, for vengeance; we may yet save your mother and sister!"

Both now fairly flew toward the red glare that illumined the sky, rendered the moon pale, and flashed over the vast ocean of chaparral. Headlong, at terrific speed, with tortured hearts and brains, rode these Mexican and Texan youths.

Perhaps the bullet of the bandit, which had benumbed the brain of the young ranchero, to a certain extent prevented his anguish from being as acute, or he as desperate and despairing as he would have been in a more natural state. But the frequent glances of Jose into the face of his pard caused the Mexican lad to shudder; so drawn, and changed, and pale, were Little Lariat's features.

He, too, suffered little less; picturing, as he did the golden-haired sister of his friend in the repulsive embrace of Canales Carajal, the miscreant marauder!

The eyes of Little Lariat were fixed, in a horrified agony, upon the glare of his home; and the pictures created in his imagination of the possible happenings there, must have been terrible indeed, to produce the feelings mirrored by the expression of face and eye.

He spoke no words of blame to Jose for his previous reticence, yet it would have been quite natural for him to have been indignant, and to have accused him of criminal neglect.

Jose knew that, had he not been captured by Pecan Pete, he would have had ample time to reach the ranch before the attack had been made; and, possibly, he could have guided Mrs. Benton and her daughter to a place of safety.

Every flash of the flames above the chaparrals seemed to burn into the very soul of Little Lariat, and he groaned in agony, as he drove deep the cruel spurs. Surely now, if not before, he had sufficient cause to devote his life to vengeance upon the followers of Juan Cortina! Henceforth, he vowed, he would be as merciless as an Apache, when a bandit fell into his power.

Following well-known paths that led in a serpentine course toward his home, the sharp scratching and tearing of the torturing thorns on the mesquite branches through which he dashed at fearful speed being unnoticed, his eyes fastened upon the glare of the fire—thus on went the youthful ranchero.

Jose Sanchez followed, with equal speed; the mustangs of both being covered with foam, panting with exertion, and grunting from the pain inflicted by the cruel spurs.

But short was this terrible ride, for the speed that was maintained soon brought the two youths to the "open," both shooting from the dense chaparral into the clear space, like arrows shot from bow. And both, with deep groans, jerked their animals to haunches; for, dwelling and corrals were but smoldering ruins, and not a vestige of life was to be seen within the "open!" All was silent as death.

Quickly the youths again drove spurs, and sped up as near the ruins as their affrighted steeds could be forced.

Plain "sign" was there of the marauders—unmistakable "sign!"

The beautiful flowers were trampled to earth by many unshod mustangs; and, as they made their way slowly around the rear of the ruined house, pools of blood were discovered. The keen eyes of the young Mexican detected spades and shovels, that had evidently been cast aside in a hurry near newly-turned earth—a large grave, without doubt, in which several human beings had been buried.

The pole that had been used to break in the door, was but partly burned; and, as Little Lariat knew it had been brought from the corals, he decided that not only had his mother and sister seen the approach of the bandits, but that they had had sufficient time to secure the doors, if not the windows as well.

Then, when he perceived the grave, he and Jose gazed into each other's eyes in horror.

Could it be possible that the outlaws had slain Mrs. Benton and Bertha?

Here was a mystery which only the opening of the grave would solve.

Whose blood was it that stained the sward?

A moment's reflection, and an examination of the ground, decided the two lads that some of the bandits had been killed.

But who had done this?

Who had been with the women when the ranch was attacked?

These questioning thoughts occurred to both, seemingly at the same time; for, as Jose sprung toward the newly-made grave, so did Little Lariat. Each grasped a spade, and began casting away the earth in frantic haste; longing, and yet dreading to uncover the corpses beneath, lest the faces of Mrs. Benton and Bertha should be revealed to their horrified gaze.

The outlaws had not buried their comrades deep, and soon our young friends uncovered no fewer than six dead Greasers, their repulsive faces and forms made more so by the violent deaths they had met, and the dirt of the grave mingled with their own gore.

A loud cry of relief and thankfulness broke from both Bert and Jose, as the last of the hideous corpses was exposed to view.

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Little Lariat.

"My worst fears were unfounded. But my mother and sister are in the power of those who know no mercy. Jose, stand by me!—Come—the trail! The trail!"

"I am with you, Little Lariat, to the last breath," said the young Mexican, quickly. "We must not give way to our feelings, for the lives of your mother and sister depend upon us alone. I should have supposed that the soldiers and citizens would have been here, as the flames must have been seen."

"Yet some one must have been defending the dwelling. Who could it have been? There are no slain Texans here. Did the demons cast them into the flames?"

"Perhaps the senora and senorita were rescued. How know you they have been captured? Can you explain it?"

"Jose Sanchez," said Bert, "my mother and sister killed those bandits. All were slain with buckshot. They defended the ranch and themselves until the door was broken in. It is all as plain as daylight to me."

"*Santissima Maria!*" cried Jose, in the greatest surprise and admiration; "your mother and sister are indeed brave. But we must start on the trail at once. We will rescue them now, or die in the attempt!"

While thus speaking, the youths had not remained at the grave, but slowly strode in a circling course, to pass around the ruins of the ranch; both of them examining the ground intently, and fortunately for them, passing along by the rear of the burned dwelling first. Soon they halted, with ejaculations of surprise and relief.

"By heavens!" was the exclamation of Little Lariat; "the fiends have not gone toward the road, but north. I had no idea of discovering the trail here."

"Lead the horses, Jose, and follow! I will trace the miscreants on foot, until we know their course, and can determine what point they are heading for. As to the soldiers and citizens, I do not want them to follow the trail; for, if they charged into the bandits, my mother and Bertha would be killed. The followers of that demon, Carajal, after having had their comrades shot down by them, will slay their captives before they will allow them to be rescued."

"You are right, pard," agreed Jose. "You have a better judgment, and a better control of

yourself than I have. Under such sad circumstances, it is fortunate indeed that it is so."

"Go on, now! I will secure the horses; and, as you suggest, we will try and get clear of the 'open' before any one else arrives."

Little Lariat, half bent, proceeded rapidly along the trail, which was well defined, as the flames still illumined the "open."

Jose, after securing the animals, led them after his pard; and soon the two youthful avengers and rescuers were beyond the smoldering corrals, having found the place where the marauders had entered the chaparral. It was apparent that they had proceeded eastward, parallel with the Rio Grande, but a considerable distance from the same.

"Capitan Carajal is as cunning as a fox, but I'll outwit him," said the young ranchero, with determination; his eyes blazing with a thirst for revenge, which at times was banished to give place to the most harrowing concern and anguish.

"He was afraid to go toward either ford, knowing that the flames would be likely to alarm the rancheros, and could also be seen at Ringold Barracks and Rio Grande City. It is strange he should have cut off his retreat, by allowing the ranch to be fired."

"Come, Jose, mount and on! Rescue and revenge must be our war-cry! I'll save my mother and sister, or die in the attempt; and if lose my life I must, I swear that I will cause some of the cowardly fiends to give their last yell before I knock under!"

"Come, my faithful friend and pard! May Heaven protect them and us, and lead us to them!"

"Lead on, Little Lariat! I'll follow. But be keen and careful, or we shall lose the trail, and thus doom those whom we would serve to a worse than death."

"I shall bear that in mind, you may be sure. May the Fates, that have been so cruel to me and mine, be more kindly and merciful from this moment!"

"Amen!" came with much feeling from Jose; and the two youths disappeared on the trail of the bandits, in the dark shades of the chaparral.

On they went, trusting to their knowledge of the grassy "opens," cattle-paths, and probable course that Capitan Carajal would travel, more than to any indication, or "sign," which, however plain by daylight, was not to be distinguished by night, in the depth of gloom in that sea of thorns.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE TRAIL.

JOSE and Little Lariat had formed very comfortable couches of the blankets and saddles, for the two wounded Texans, Pecan Pete, and Nueces Ned; and it was not many minutes after the departure of the two youths, before the wearied men both sunk into slumber, lulled by the sounds made by the horses near them, tearing up the rich grass of the "open."

Weakness from loss of blood had tended toward both passing easily into the land of dreams; but both were, on ordinary occasions, light sleepers, awaking at the slightest unusual sounds, and as their recent startling adventures, coupled with a consciousness before going to sleep of the danger of their position should other bandits seek those who had been slain near their covert—all this tended to cause our friends to be nearly as easily aroused as when in a natural state of health.

The consequence was, that their slumbers were not only rendered restless and broken by the yelping and snarling of coyotes, but they were wide awake in a very short time after having sunk to sleep; for the sneak wolves mentioned scented the blood of the slain Greasers, and gathered in the vicinity in large numbers.

There is no night sound more annoying and irritating than the yelping and snarling of a pack of coyotes. This constantly disturbed the slumbers of the scouts, besides greatly infuriating them, for they were in need of sleep.

Then, after becoming thoroughly awake, their wounds became troublesome.

All this, although at the time it was disagreeable in the extreme, the pair afterward acknowledged to have been providential.

"Sufferin' Moses!" burst from Pecan Pete, as he opened his eyes for good, having vainly striven to drop off again into slumber. "Dang, an' double dang ther condemned kiotes! Why in thunderation den't they take thar Greaser hash in peace, an' 'low we-uns what furnished 'em the'r feed, ter siester a few fletin' periods?"

Nueces Ned, with a groan, turned slightly in his blankets, and spoke also:

"I reckon I'll give it up too, pard Pete. I did hate to be disturbed, and for that reason did not move or speak lest I should awaken you. I have had only a cat-nap, for I've been listening to the coyote concert for some time. I don't believe we are going to get much rest to-night."

"By ther bleed o' Crockett! Ef ther jubilee air kep' up, I'll git roarin', ragin' mad, an' be incarnated ter waste powder on ther yelpin' critters."

"That would be foolish, Pete, and imprudent too as we are situated; for the reports might bring a pack of Greasers down on us. If the gang that we cleaned out are but a portion of a larger band, it seems probable that the others may be here before morning; for they were about to encamp above us, according to the report of Little Lariat."

"Sufferin' Moses!"

Thus exclaimed Pecan Pete, as he sprung to a sitting posture, and gazed through the sparse foliage at the western sky.

"What has struck you now?" asked Ned, quickly, at the same time clutching at his revolver.

"Great Goliath! I thought ther sun went down a long time 'fore we-uns crawled in hyer."

"Most certainly it did," agreed Ned, struggling to his feet with difficulty, for his wound had stiffened. "What of it?"

"Then, by the great gates o' Jericho, hit's comin' back ag'in! Fer I'll sw'ar hit ain't mornin', an' I'm dead-sure I'm gazin' west'ard. Jist look, pard, an' then ax me what of hit?"

The old scout caught hold of a mesquite-bush, and drew himself to a standing position, assisting Ned to the same.

When the two men stood upright the amazement of both was extreme.

For a moment they stood speechless.

That which they beheld was the light of the burning ranch, which, although four miles in a direct line from them, was remarkably bright and striking in the nighttime, though no flames could be seen. In a moment, however, the character of the strange light became known to them.

They knew it must proceed from a large fire, without doubt a burning ranch.

"Dang my ole heart, Ned! Thar's more hellishness, er I'm a nigger!"

"I reckon you're right, Pete!"

"An' dang me o' I ain't inclined to presume hit's Leetle Lariat's ranch!"

"Right again you are. For that is the direction he pointed out before leaving here, and he said it was about four miles. That's his home burning, I haven't a doubt; and his mother and sister were there alone, for that was the reason he left us."

"I noticed that he and Jose seemed greatly worried. When we captured that Mexican boy he said he had important news for the owner of Benton Ranch. That's Little Lariat. Now, I honestly believe he knew they were in danger and was riding to warn them when we corraled him."

"It does look, pard, as though we were guilty of a great mistake, to say the least of it, for he would have had time to reach the ranch had we not detained him. However, there was something providential in the affair, for through capturing Jose we were enabled to save the life of Little Lariat, and wipe out a number of the rascally Greasers."

"Ye're right thar, pard; but arter all, Leetle Lariat mought hev skinned through O. K.; 'sides hit's jist orful fer weemin ter be tuck by ther or'nary, miser'ble scum o' Cortina. I won't let myself down light, fer I'll own hit war nasty all 'roun' fer ter stop the Mexi boyee."

"I war jist hungry ter hang a Greaser, er I wouldn't ha' did, hit—dog-gone me ef I would! But, what's ter be did now?"

"I sw'ar hit's thunderin' tough ter be in this fix, an' we-uns needed ter perreck caliker—needed bad, by granny!"

"Well, it can't be helped. Little Lariat and Jose have arrived at the ranch by this time, and perhaps have been captured or shot. But that light will alarm the country hereabouts, and help will come."

"Ya-as, as us'al, arter ther Greasers hev skuted 'cross ther Grande. I sw'ar ter crackey, this air billions! I'm goin' ter chaw ther bark off a mesquite tree, jist ter vent my hyderphobic!"

Nueces Ned would have laughed at the expressions and manner of the old scout, had he been in a laughing mood. As it was, he gazed at the glow in the west, with a mind full of painful imaginings.

Perfectly helpless were they, as far as going to the aid of the Bentons was concerned; but,

for that matter, they knew it would be useless, as the marauders were undoubtedly miles away by that time from the ruins, with the plunder and captives they had secured. Grin and bear it, they must.

But, to those wounded Texans, it was torture, to be thus forced to remain inactive when they were so badly needed; and that, by those belonging to Little Lariat, who had made a most favorable impression upon them.

The coyotes had been drawing nearer, and their yelping had increased; but, to the surprise of the two scouts, who were viewing the light of the conflagration, now dying down gradually, the barking suddenly ceased at the northward and westward, toward the gully and the point where Little Lariat had discovered the bandits.

Not only did the wounded men notice this sudden cessation of yelping, at the points mentioned, but they soon detected the rush of large numbers of the wolves southward, passing between their covert and the wash-out. The affrighted state of these animals spreading to the others, the chaparrals soon became silent—a silence that was most impressive.

"What in thunderation's broke loose now?" exclaimed Pecan Pete, in a surprised tone of voice. "Thar's somethin' what ain't dead 'nough fer kiotes in this hyer locate, an' somethin' what ther skulkin' scavengers air afeard ter linger nigh to."

"Hu-s-sh!" came, in warning, from Nueces Ned; "keep cool and silent, pard! You know very well, although you do not wish to alarm me, that enemies are near at hand. It is Greasers, you may depend. Just keep still, and listen, for we're in a tight box!"

As Ned spoke, he slowly lowered himself to a sitting posture, Pete following his example, and afterward whispering:

"Ye're mighty right, Ned! I know'd fu'st off thet thar war more o' ther yaller-bellies sneakin' nigh ther locate. Leastways, I war ormighty sure hit war Greasers, fer everything p'inted thet-a-way. Ef our critters doesn't gin us away, we're hunky, I reckon, ontill sun-up; but then look out, fer things 'll be lively."

For some time, the pair remained silent, both listening intently.

They heard sounds, but so slight as to baffle them as to how or by whom made; yet, they had not the slightest doubt, that a body of bandits from Mexico were within rifle-shot of them.

"Hark!"

Thus exclaimed the old scout quickly, after a period of listening to the strange sounds.

"Bend low!" he added, a moment later.

Had there been any doubt in their minds, it was soon banished; for the sound of many hoofs met their ears, and they knew that the animals were advancing slowly, and that they were ridden by human beings.

It was now evident to the two Texans, that they were encompassed by dangers, which it would be difficult to avoid. To be sure, they could equip their horses, crawl into their saddles, and slowly retreat toward the river; but they might be discovered, and that before a retreat could be made.

Such reasonings seemed to have occupied the mind of each, for Ned whispered:

"We'll stay, and risk it."

"Ya-as, I reckon," agreed Pete.

They continued listening.

From long practice, and a thorough knowledge of the sounds made by the movements of animals, the scouts were enabled to decide that the night-riders had gained a location that suited them as a camping-place, had halted, and were then leading their horses to different points, for the purpose of securing them at favorable grazing "opens."

Soon the old scout again whispered:

"Some o' ther galoots air leadin' the'r nags plum ter whar ther 'stiffs' air laid out!"

"I am sure they are," returned Ned; "and they will soon know their fellow-bandits have come to grief."

Barely had this whisper left the young scout's lips, when a yell of superstitious horror burst on the night air. This was close followed by another, as if an echo of the first; and then a shriek cut to the very hearts of the listeners, as it evidently was uttered by a woman in deadly peril.

"Sufferin' Moses! Hit's ther same outfit thet burned Leetle Lariat's ranch, an' thet's his sister!"

These words of Pecan Pete were spoken almost too loud for safety.

"You're right," responded Ned, "and we'll do our level best toward her rescue. We ain't worth much, but I'm on the crawl, from the word go!"

The scouts, by this time, were on their feet. "Thet's me, pard, clean ter ther backbone," said Pete. "We'll drap some more Greasers, ter keep t'others company an' furnish lunch fer all them howlin' kiotes."

Delaying only to secure their carbines, and take a drink of brandy, the two wounded Texans stole, on their hands and knees, through the chaparral, repudiating pain and weakness, and resolved to rescue the captives.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CAPTIVES IN CAMP.

BERTHA BENTON, bound fast in a cruel manner upon a horse, was forced to gaze upon her mother in a like position. Beyond the bent form of the poor woman, the maiden could distinguish the brutal bandits winding in a line through the shades of the chaparral. Not a word was spoken by the outlaws, and the captives had been threatened with cruel gags did they attempt to do so.

Silent and grim, all proceeded through the weird shades; above them, in strong contrast, shining the silvery moon.

Bertha dared not think of the future in connection with her own probable fate.

And then—her poor mother! It was dreadful, it was too horrible!

Before the start had been made, the poor girl had heard the vengeful threats of the bandits, and saw that Carajal could hardly control them; that he could with difficulty prevent them from slaying them both, in sight of their burning home. This, the unfortunate maiden felt, might happen now at any moment.

One could scarce be nearer insanity, from terror and anguish, than was Bertha Benton.

The wonder was that she did not faint in her bonds; and only the sight of the bowed form of her mother, in the power of such murderous wretches, kept her from losing sense and reason.

On they rode, until it seemed to the poor girl that the march would never end—that she must die in that position, bound to the horse!

And yet, as they proceeded further and further, the fact shot through Bertha's brain that, although they had traveled more than the distance necessary to reach the Rio Grande, they had not yet seen that river.

Not until a faint hope arose in consequence of this did she reason and consider as to the point at which the bandits had left the "open" in which had been her home, and the course they had traveled. Gazing at the moon, she perceived that they were going in a southeasterly direction, and nearly parallel with the Rio Grande, being little nearer it than when they started.

This gave fresh hope to the unhappy captive, for she did not believe the outlaws would cross the river that night, and consequently pursuers might overtake them and a rescue be accomplished. She felt confident that her brother had reached the "open," had seen his desolated home, and that he would hasten for help.

Most certainly the light of the burning ranch would have been seen by Little Lariat.

The maiden then thought upon the anguish the poor boy would suffer on beholding the ruins of his home, and realizing that she and their mother had been carried away.

As she was thus agonizing herself by thoughts of Bert's misery, when certainly she had enough of her own to bear without it, the head of the line made halt at a point where the thickets were more scattered, and mesquites grew here and there, with intervals of green sward. Soon the horses to which her mother and herself were bound were led forward by a burly bandit, and Bertha saw that the lawless horde were about to encamp.

The equipments and packed plunder were removed from the beasts, and then the captives were released from the saddles. Capitan Carajal advanced to assist Bertha, but she slid quickly off from the mustang to the earth, rather than permit the loathsome bandit chief to touch her with his murder-stained hands.

This act on her part caused rude laughter, ribald jests and curses, that shocked the fair girl; but this was banished, as a fearful yell rung out from the shades, followed by another, just as an outlaw roughly jerked Mrs. Benton from the horse to which she had been bound, and flung her upon the sward.

This brutal act, and the sight of her mother, apparently dead, caused Bertha to utter a piercing cry of anguish, which was blended with terror, as one of the miscreant Mexicans drew his *cuchillo*, and sprang toward her.

These were the shrieks that were heard by Pecan Pete and Nueces Ned, and which caused them, weak and wounded though they were, to

resolve to rescue the female, whom they believed, and with truth, to be the sister of Little Lariat.

Capitan Carajal darted forward, between Bertha and the bandit, who would without doubt have plunged his knife into the heart of the maiden, had not his chief prevented it. This Greaser evidently thought that the yells of his comrades had been caused by the discovery of foes, and that the shriek of the captive maiden was uttered as an appeal for help, and to guide the strangers to her rescue.

Bertha was thus convinced that the lives of her mother and herself hung upon a hair—that at any time, in the absence of Carajal, the bandits might murder them.

Any fate, except that which she feared would be hers if the outlaw chief succeeded in taking her over the Rio Grande, would have been welcomed; but Bertha was not devoid of hope—even the yells she had heard being interpreted by her as favorable to rescue—for it appeared to the poor girl that anything which frightened the bandits so terribly must act to a certain extent against them, and consequently for herself and parent.

At once she sprang forward, and knelt beside the outstretched form of her mother, and her heart was filled with joy at finding she had not fainted. Her fear had been that terror and anguish had finally done their work.

With threatening manner and curses, Capitan Carajal drove back the Greaser who had attempted to stab Bertha; the fellow slinking quietly away when he realized that he was not seconded by his comrades, and that the yells had not proceeded from enemies near their camping place.

The nature of the alarm was soon made known by those who had been so terrified; these men rushing headlong back to camp, with ashen faces, and eyes starting in superstitious horror.

Their leader seized one of them, and with his knife at the affrighted wretch's throat, forced an explanation from him. Hearing it, he at once decided that the portion of his band sent in advance had come to grief, and he rushed to the nearest point, where the frightened men had sworn they had seen spirits from the infernal regions, to investigate matters.

Had those who had been so startled remained long enough to look at the faces of the dead, they would have recognized old comrades; but, breaking through the bushes, directly upon the slain, who lay in different positions, the terrified bandits had turned and fled, as though the avenging fiends were after them.

When Capitan Carajal ascertained, beyond all doubt, that the dead were those he had sent on in advance to capture Little Lariat, he became frantic with rage. It was impossible to keep the facts from the others, and he knew every one would be mad for revenge; and they might even rebel against him for refusing to allow the women to be slain.

He had determined that Bertha Benton should be his victim, or wife, he cared not which from the time when he first saw her, in all her angelic loveliness, at the ball in Rio Grande City; and, since she had fallen into his power, notwithstanding she had cost him so dear through so many of his followers having been killed, he was ready to brave death by the knives of his own men, rather than she should be harmed by them.

The chief knew that he was in a very dangerous position—that his trail might be discovered and followed by the Texans, although he had planned so cunningly to outwit them, by taking a course the opposite of that which they would naturally suppose he would travel.

In addition to this, he was personally in danger from his own men, who had begun to believe that he was a very unfortunate leader, and that all who followed him were doomed to death.

Under these circumstances, it was necessary for him to concoct some explanation, which would, for the present, calm their fears. He strode quickly from one point to another visiting the guilty last of all, and counting the dead. He knew that there had been but few Texans engaged in the fight. This was plain, from the fact that there had been several of his men slain in hand-to-hand conflicts, in the wash-out.

It was impossible, by moonlight, to ascertain further in connection with the party who had ambushed his men; but Carajal fully believed Little Lariat to be one of them, which accounted for the youth's absence from the ranch when it was attacked.

Probably the successful Texans had gone toward Benton Ranch after the fight, but they had not reached the "open" until too late to prevent the capture of the women and the destruction of the buildings and corrals.

The thoughts of the outlaw chief flew rapidly through his brain as he retraced his steps toward his camp and his followers.

All the band were now collected together, conversing in a most excited manner; many of them being thoroughly frightened, and advocating a rapid retreat across the Rio Grande, even were they forced to cut their way through the Texans, whom they believed to be on the watch for them.

"Are you all children?" cried out Carajal in derision and strong contempt. "Are you fools, that you take fright at the harmless dead? I have been to look upon the sights that so terrified you. I went alone, and I return, as you see, unharmed and unmoved except by grief. Listen to me!

"Comrades, our friends who crossed the Bravo before us have all been slain; but, had they obeyed my orders, they would all have been now alive. They should have made a circuit of the ranch, never being over two miles from the same, and have met us near the Government road.

"Those were my directions, and when they failed to join us, I feared that which I now see has occurred. All have been slain, but they died fighting, and that death is the fortune of war, especially such a warfare as we are now engaged in.

"I admit that we are in a dangerous position, but we could not be in a more secure place, anywhere within ten miles of where we now are. Why, you ask in your mind?

"I will answer. It is because here there has just been a fight, and the dead lie around as yet untainted, and untorn by the wolves. For that very reason, the Texans will not come again to this point.

"This is the very last place at which they will think of searching for us, and here we are safe, at least for this one night and to-morrow. We have gotten together a good booty, plenty of plunder of every kind, and when we cross the river, it shall all be divided equally among you.

"I ask nothing, except the captives.

"I swore revenge upon all that belonged to Little Lariat, when, through him, I lost so many of my brave followers a week ago, and I now hold his mother and sister in my power. To kill them would be but poor revenge. I know of a better way.

"The senorita with golden hair, the sister of Little Lariat, shall be the slave of your chief. So now let us eat, drink and sleep. All except the guard can so enjoy themselves.

"We care not for the Texan dogs. We encamp on the land they stole from us, after the blood of our countrymen had moistened the soil over and over. *Viva Mexico! Viva Cortina!*"

"*Viva Cortina! Viva el Capitan Carajal!*"

These outcries were now general.

All seemed to have been made easy in their minds by the words of their chief, and to have banished all fear and superstitious terror; indeed, they began to put on blustering airs, bragging and vaunting one to another of their prowess, and that which they would exhibit should they be attacked by the Texans.

CHAPTER XII.

LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

NOTWITHSTANDING that Carajal had succeeded in quieting the superstitious fears of his band as to the bad luck they had believed would attend the expedition, the chief knew that a slight cause would be sufficient to change them again. When he had returned to Mexico a week previous, with but one of his men remaining, that his good fortune had forsaken him.

However, he had found little difficulty in obtaining volunteers for his present raid; but now, these recent fearful reverses would be likely to cause them again to decide that he was not a fitting commander.

He knew that it would be next to impossible for him to get another party of men under his command for a raid into Texas. Consequently, Capitan Carajal was desperate, and would have been utterly discouraged, were it not that he had the maiden he had sworn to possess in his power.

To Little Lariat he fully believed he owed all his evil fortune, and it was a source of great exultation to him that he had it in his power to avenge himself upon the young ranchero. He had the mother and sister, and that was more than he had dared hope for.

After quieting his men the bandit chief ordered a small space to be walled in by the saddles and plunder, and the captives to be placed within the same. Fires were then kindled in the bed of the upper end of the gully, food was prepared

and eaten; after which all enjoyed their cigarettes. Then the animals were brought nearer to the camp, a guard being posted, when all rolled themselves in their blankets preparatory to a night's rest.

Bertha had succeeded in bringing her mother back to consciousness, and the two lay sobbing in each other's arms. The maiden informed her mother that there was no doubt Bert had been at that very point, in a fight with a portion of Carajal's men, and that the latter had all been slain.

She had listened eagerly to all that had been said by the outlaws, and had gained this knowledge which brought hope to them both.

It was beyond question that Little Lariat had others with him in the fight, and that he and they had escaped death, otherwise their corpses would have been discovered by the bandits.

All things considered, it was reasonable to suppose—so Bertha told her mother—that Bert and those with him had seen the glare of the burning ranch and sped to the same at once—perhaps arriving but a moment or two after they and their captors had disappeared in the chaparrals. If so, Little Lariat would certainly discover the trail and would gallop to their rescue.

It was with such words and hope-inspiring conclusions that mother and daughter strove to lessen each other's despair in their fearful position.

Capitan Carajal reclined against the wall of saddles that inclosed his captives, and endeavored to ease his mind by constant smoking. He had no settled plan as to the disposition he would make of Mrs. Benton after reaching Mexico, but he vowed she should never again look upon Texas or the face of her son, and that son should know of his mother's and sister's hopeless condition.

This would be a grand combination of revenge and self-gratification.

Bertha could be made to bend to his will, through the suffering he intended to inflict upon the mother.

All this time his intended victims speculated on their gloomy future. Every advantage open to them, under various possible circumstances, was thoroughly reasoned upon then. They had observed Carajal going his rounds, inspecting the slain, and had listened to his address to his miscreant followers. Now, they could only hope and wait.

But there were others who had listened also.

Two pallid-faced, but determined men, who, with utter disregard for their wounds or their safety, crawled along the borders of the bandit camp.

Pecan Pete and Nueces Ned had decided to play a game on the Greasers, which they hoped would greatly demoralize them—much more than had the sudden and unexpected discovery of their slain comrades.

The shriek of Bertha had greatly affected the brave scouts.

It was to them a terrible thing, even to think of, for a helpless female to be in the power of such base and brutal miscreants, even for a short time, and though she might have good grounds for hope of rescue.

They had given no thought to their own condition, had paid no attention to their wounds, crushing down the pain they felt, which was especially torturing upon their first making the attempt to crawl past through the bushes; and they had conquered, as far as was possible, their weakness, gaining a good position finally, from which they could inspect the camp of the outlaws, and that at a favorable time.

No scene more calculated to enlist the services, and govern the sympathies of an observer, was ever witnessed, than that presented by the lovely golden-haired maiden; her wavy tresses nearly veiling her bent form, her face pallid as death, and stamped with an expression of suffering, that was torturing to one not positively iron-hearted to look upon.

This beautiful girl, in such terrible anguish, with an awful fate threatening her, kneeling by the side of her seemingly dead mother, with a horde of crime-stained outlaws ranged on all sides—this was the tableau which so affected the two Texans, as they first gazed from their covert—affected them so much that they were compelled to turn their heads, and came near betraying their presence, in their efforts to suppress groans of sympathy.

But, after the first rush of this and kindred feelings that racked their hearts, their teeth closed together, and slowly ground, as their eyes flashed in the intensity of their hatred for the cowardly abductors of the fair girl before them; and their thirst for revenge—revenge, that could

be satisfied only when every bandit concerned in the dastard deed lay low in death—grew more intense each instant as they watched.

The two scouts gripped their weapons, and that was all they could do at that time. Indeed, there seemed no possible opening for them to do aught to favor the captives; nor was there likely to be any chance, but for all that they set their minds at work, meanwhile conversing in low whispers.

If Little Lariat and Jose Sanchez had been with them, there would have been no hesitation. All would have charged into the midst of the camp, against four times their number; braving almost certain death, rather than be compelled any longer to witness the agony of that lovely and helpless girl.

As it was, the pair lay, silent and watchful of every movement among the bandits.

They witnessed the changing of the mustangs, the posting of the guard, and the gradual dropping off, one after another, of the cigarette-smokers into slumber.

At length all slept, except the chief and those acting as sentinels, there being but two of the latter; and Carajal himself soon closed his eyes.

Not until then, did Ned and Pete commence operations.

They decided that the sentinels must be slain, before anything else could be attempted.

They knew that it would be madness for them to enter the camp, and make an effort to rescue the captives.

The outlaws, or some of them might be awakened by their approach; or, even did they get inside the inclosure, the ladies, who might have fallen into a semi-somnolent state, might cry out upon being aroused—thus alarming the camp, and dooming the rescuers, and themselves as well, to death.

Having thus concluded, our friends fixed upon a plan of operations that promised success.

They had noticed the points where the two sentries had been posted, and both at once proceeded to crawl together to the thicket, on the border of which the first of the guards stood, idly star-gazing, as he puffed his shuck cigarette. The time had come.

The greatest caution was necessary, but the scouts were men who not only knew the importance of this, but the various and skillful ways to practice it, amid the disadvantages under which they acted.

Nueces Ned knew that his wound was liable to break out afresh and bleed profusely, perhaps cause him to become so weak and faint that he would be helpless, and thus become an easy victim to the outlaws; but he hesitated not, for he felt that his life was as nothing, when compared with the liberty, or the present sufferings, of the captives.

Never had the young scout gazed upon a female face and form that had so captivated him as had Bertha Benton.

His whole being had been thrilled, even by viewing the maiden from his hiding-place, which was some distance from her position.

But there was now no time for Ned to attempt analyzing his new and strange emotions.

All he did know was, the feeling that he had looked upon one, who, even before he had spoken with her, or met her face to face, could rule his destiny; one who was, or who would be, did a gracious Heaven permit, more than all others—more than all the world to him!

Such were the young man's thoughts, but action was the order of the hour.

His whole mind and strength must be strained to accomplish the rescue of the ladies, and that without entertaining a hope—so superior a being did Bertha Benton appear in his eyes—of ever being more to her than he then was.

As to Pecan Pete, his emotions compared not with those of his yard; although his grand aim was, also, the rescue of the women at all hazards. His hatred of the Greasers was perhaps as strong as his desire to free the captive. This seemed to give him double strength.

As stealthily as young Apaches on their first war-path, our two friends crawled toward the still sentinel, who was doubtless then thinking of his Dulcinea, beyond the Rio Bravo.

It was impossible to reach a position near enough for their purpose, by crawling within the thicket; consequently the two Texans stole clear of the bushes at different points, each stealing along close to the margin of the thicket, one on each side.

Soon they reached points, beyond which they knew it would be madness to pass. Then both sprang upon the Greaser, so quickly and unexpectedly, that he was terrified to speechlessness; and, before he recovered, Pete's sombrero was stuffed into his mouth, while the hand of the old

scout clutched his throat, and the knife of Nueces Ned was driven deep into his breast!

There was no outcry from the death-stricken bandit, as it was impossible for him to make any sound, except a gurgling one, which could be heard but a few paces distant.

For a short time, the guard struggled convulsively in a spasmodic manner, writhing in the death-agony, and held firmly by the desperate Texans, whose lives depended upon their preventing his making any sound. Then, limp and lifeless, they laid him upon the sward, in the shade of the mesquites.

Then the two scouts, without a word to each other, crept to the post of the remaining sentinel; and, in not more than fifteen minutes after starting upon their perilous mission, Pecan Pete and Nueces Ned were masters of the situation—the two guards being dead, and the bandit horde wrapped in slumber before them, unconscious of danger.

But the daring pair had much yet to accomplish.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUT HALF ACCOMPLISHED.

JUST south of the clear space, in the middle of which was the bandit camp, grew an unusually large mesquite tree, and beneath this the Texans drew the slain sentinels. This done, they hastened away, but soon returned, dragging another dead Mexican. This last was one of the advance party of bandits, who had been shot by Little Lariat, when the young ranchero first came upon the outlaws in the gully. One by one, Pete and Ned dragged the slain up to the huge mesquite tree.

It was laborious work for the two wounded men, but they had an end in view.

In a little time, twelve Greaser corpses hung, suspended by their necks, from the limbs of the mesquite, and slowly swaying.

But the Texans stopped not with that, for light was needed to fully reveal the horrible burdens of the bending mesquite.

Quickly they gathered a mass of dead limbs and twigs, setting fire to them, and then stealing to the shades, intending to pass around to the opposite side of the camp, thus being better posted for the projected rescue. Regaining their carbines, which they had secreted in a thicket, the two daring scouts breathed more freely as they proceeded along the line of bushes, to gain a position on the north side of the bandit camp.

But they were destined to be disappointed in this attempt; for, not twenty paces had they proceeded—they being hidden from the camp—when a yell of horror and superstitious terror shot through the night air.

Instantly Pete and Ned darted into the line of bushes, and gazed out at the Greasers.

At the moment the yell sounded, the two Texans felt that their work had been fruitless; but they still hoped for some favorable opening, which would enable them to rescue the captives.

When they gained a view of the camp, every bandit had sprung from his blanket, and all stood gazing in speechless dread at the twelve circling corpses, the glassy eyes of which were terribly distinct by the blaze of the fire.

It was, indeed, a horrible sight!

Only for a moment, however, did the outlaws thus stand. Then they rushed madly in every direction, many falling to the earth, and over and upon each other, in their desperate efforts to escape from a sight that chilled the very blood in their veins.

Capitan Carajal, saw at once that his band was demoralized, and that enemies were at hand.

With a wild bound, he sprung over the wall of saddles, caught up the shrieking Bertha, tearing her from her grasp upon her mother, and speeding away down the bed of the wash-out. It had not been necessary for him to gag his fair captive; for, with the loud screams she uttered when she found herself in the embrace of the merciless Carajal, went out all consciousness. Bertha Benton lay, limp and to all appearance dead, in the arms of her abductor; her face as ghastly as that of a corpse.

Neither Ned nor Pete observed this act of the outlaw chief, for the latter accomplished his purpose when his followers were in such a mad mob, struggling together; and the attention of the Texans was just then called to their rear, by the rapid clattering of hoofs.

A moment after, to the surprise and joy of the scouts, they saw Little Lariat and Jose Sanchez galloping at headlong speed toward them.

With loud cheers, Ned and Pete sprung from the mesquites, and then the "blue whistlers" from the carbines of the quartette tore through the massed Mexicans. The scene that followed was simply indescribable.

Bandits fell, dead and dying, their yells mingling with the rattle of revolvers, as the four assailants dashed upon those who fled in wild disorder. One, however, sprung over the barrier of saddles, with the evident intention of slaying the captives. But one of these remained—poor Mrs. Benton, who had again become insensible.

Straight, as if he knew the exact place where his dear ones were, dashed Little Lariat, just catching a view of his mother's pale face and outstretched form as the swarthy assassin poised his knife for the fatal blow. But the steel was not buried in the poor woman's breast, for at that instant a bullet from the revolver of the young ranchero pierced the bandit's brain, and he fell dead across the form of his intended victim.

The next moment Bert Benton sprung from his horse and leaped into the inclosure, catching up the senseless form of his mother in his arms.

Both Ned and Pete, revolvers in hand, rushed to the side of the wall of saddles and plunder, their eyes shooting glances in all directions.

Jose Sanchez joined them almost immediately. The four friends gazed from one to another.

By this time not a Mexican was to be seen, except the dead and dying, more than half of the band being struck by the bullets of the Texans.

All the survivors had vanished.

Where was Bertha Benton?

The eyes of each put the question.

Capitan Carajal was not among the dead or wounded.

Little Lariat was the first to gain his speech, but his voice sounded strange and unnatural:

"Pards, my sister is not here. Those demons have carried her away. For God's sake, save her from Carajal! I cannot leave my mother, unless one of you will remain with her."

"Ned's too bad hurted ter go. Let him stay, an' let's we-uns git lively!"

So sung out Pecan Pete.

Both Pete and Jose were eager to go in pursuit.

Mrs. Benton, however, partially revived. She opened her eyes at length in a dazed state, but was soon as astonished as she was rejoiced at finding herself in the arms of her son, and at recognizing Jose and a Texan, who was undoubtedly a friend. The faces of all expressed mingled sympathy and concern.

At last the poor woman seemed to recall the last harrowing scene that had met her appalled gaze previous to her sinking into insensibility. It seemed to bring with it an anguish that was harrowing, for she sprung free from the support of Little Lariat, standing erect and raising her arms, as she cried out, in a wild voice, in great excitement:

"Oh, Bertha! my darling Bertha! Oh, my son, fly to her rescue! Capitan Carajal has her. I remember all now. She is lost!"

Almost insane with grief poor Mrs. Benton appeared, and her touching appeal was more than Pete or Jose could bear. Both sprung toward the mesquites and disappeared in the shades, regardless of the calls of Little Lariat, who was frantic to go in search of his sister. The youth wished Pecan Pete to remain with his mother, and allow him to go on the trail of the bandit chief.

Thus, amid the dead and wounded outlaws, were the mother and son left; while the corpses swaying from the limbs of the mesquite tree, added to the horrors of the illumined scene.

Suddenly Mrs. Benton seemed to realize that she was hindering the rescue of her daughter. She felt that Bert should be also searching for Bertha, and she called out, as excitedly as before:

"Go, my son! Go, and save your sister, if possible! You can secrete me in a thicket, or I will ride one of the bandits' horses, accompanying you as far as the road. Then I'll gallop to Rio Grande City for help. Our Bertha must be saved, or I shall go mad!"

"Why, oh why, in the name of justice and mercy, are such grief and misery hurled upon us?"

"Mother, I cannot trust you to go alone, but I shall become insane myself if I remain inactive. Let me saddle a horse for you. Come!"

Leading his own mustang, the youth and his mother, hand in hand, proceeded hastily toward the staked animals of the bandits. In a short space of time, Mrs. Benton was mounted upon a gentle horse; and, springing into his saddle, Lit-

tle Lariat and his mother urged their beasts west, toward a curve of the Government road.

Both were nearly wild with mental torture and anxiety in regard to poor Bertha.

Before reaching the road, however, they were rejoiced at hearing the clatter of hoofs, for they felt assured that some of the rancheros, who had seen the glare of their burning home, had hastened to the same, and then down the river in hopes of intercepting the marauders.

Nor were they mistaken.

A dozen or more infuriated Texans galloped down the road, all madly eager to annihilate the detested Greasers; and, when they were informed that Miss Benton had been carried off by Capitan Carajal, they were more furious still, and determined to follow the fugitive outlaws even into Mexico.

Little Lariat induced one of the party, who had lamed his horse, to escort Mrs. Benton to Rio Grande City; and, after an affecting farewell, mother and son parted. The latter advised the division of the ranchero into pairs, and the scouring of the chaparrals up and down the river.

His advice was followed.

Signals were agreed upon, that would bring help to any who might meet with the fleeing bandits, who, it seemed reasonable to presume, would all unite near the river.

Little Lariat, however, went in search of his sister alone, hoping he would meet with some of his pards, who would have gained some information, slight though it might be, of poor Bertha and her cowardly abductor, Capitan Carajal.

CHAPTER XIV.

NUECES NED NERVED TO THE FIGHT.

FILLED with fiendish triumph, the bandit chief rushed rapidly down the wash-out, with the senseless form of his fair captive clasped to his breast.

But he was far from being satisfied as to his safety.

The sounds of fire-arms, which followed his hasty flight, decided him that either he had been wrong in supposing the Texans to be few in number, or else that others had been near the camp, and had sped to the assistance of the assailing party. He felt, however, that for a brief space of time he would be free from pursuit; and he determined to make good use of that time. As for his land, they were utterly, and hopelessly demoralized.

But, now that Carajal had gained possession of Bertha Benton, he cared little what became of his followers.

He hoped that Little Lariat and his pards were not of the party who had attacked his camp; but he did not believe the young ranchero was present, for had he been, the youth would have been made reckless by the sight of his mother and sister in such peril, and would have endeavored to rescue them at once by a bold dash.

Had he believed that Bert Benton, and those who had been with him at the fight with his advance party—all of whom had been slain—were now among the rescuers, Capitan Carajal would have been less confident of being able to cross the Rio Grande than he was.

The outlaw leader had been so astounded and excited at the time of the alarm, and had run with such rapidity with his fair burden, that he was now much exhausted, and out of breath.

He was obliged, therefore, to halt and rest.

The moon was now high in the heavens, and at some points lighted up the great gully to its bed; but, as the wash-out was as winding as the tail of a serpent, there were sections where but one flank of the gully was revealed by Dame Luna, consequently, for all Carajal knew to the contrary, pursuers might be quite near him.

He listened intently, still retaining the senseless maiden in his arms; but he could hear nothing except the sounds from the camp.

He could not believe that all his followers had been slain, and it was pretty certain that those who escaped would naturally rush toward the river; some, perhaps, taking the very gully in which he was.

If this were the case, the bandit chief knew that his life would be in great danger. Indeed, he would just as soon meet a Texan foe as one of his own men at the present time; for, his followers who had escaped death—if there were any such—would have the most bitter enmity toward him for having deserted them in their great danger, after leading them into the enemies' country to suit his own ends.

Not only this, but they would also hate, with revengeful feelings, the maiden who had been the means of bringing disaster and death upon

the band. Carajal had no doubt that he would be forced to fight for Bertha's life, as well as for his own.

He was, therefore, in no amiable frame of mind. In fact, he became much frightened, and started up suddenly, and rushed on down the bed of the gully, which became deeper and wider as he went. At places there were portions of earth which had, during storms, fallen from either bank; large portions of the bushes still growing on the land slides, the fall not having parted the upper sward, or compact network of roots.

In a case of necessity, one of these detached portions of the upper bank might afford covert for one who wished to evade pursuers; a fact which Carajal took note of at once. Little did he dream, however, that he would soon regret not having darted into the one he had last passed. But such was the fact.

He soon detected the rapid approach of a human being behind him. It was now too late for him to run back to the last friendly landslide; and he saw that he would not have time to gain the next, before the pursuer, if such he was, would appear around the bend behind him. Believing, and with good reason, that all in his rear were foes, Carajal made up his mind to fight this man—if there was but one—to the death.

He knew that the report of his revolver would guide many who were eager for his life, he could therefore, use his knife only.

Hardly had he jerked his blade from the scabbard, when, around the bend of the wash-out, shot one of his own band.

The Greaser was the very picture of terror.

His eyes were staring, and starting from their sockets, while he constantly glanced over his shoulder, in the greatest apprehension.

This gave the bandit chief great anxiety.

He hoped that the new-comer might not show signs of enmity, but he was disappointed. The fugitive held his long knife in hand, and cried out, as he came near:

"Curses on Capitan Carajal! Curses on the senorita! I will split their hearts!"

Terrible was the sight of the maddened bandit.

He sprung headlong toward his chief, who stood ready to meet him; but just as they were about to clash knives, the furious outlaw sprung aside and to the spot where lay the unconscious Bertha Benton.

"Carajal!" he yelled, as his knife gleamed over her breast; "I will split her heart!"

But panther-like was the bound of Carajal.

Clutching his rebellious follower by the long black hair, he plunged his knife through bone and flesh!

A fierce curse and groan, then a convulsive shudder, and all was over.

Wiping his blade upon the clothing of his victim, the bandit chief again caught up Bertha in his arms, and with a wild and hunted look up the gully, sped down the wash-out as though the fiends were in pursuit.

And it seemed as though this was in reality the case; for, hardly had Capitan Carajal passed around the next turn, when two more of his band dashed around the curve, where their comrade had appeared previously. These two seemed more furious than frightened, when they discovered the corpse of their comrade. They lingered but a moment to examine it, and then rushed frantically on, cursing desperately.

Soon they came in sight of their treacherous captain, who had led so many of their number to death, and then deserted them.

They were now persuaded that Carajal cared only for himself and had sacrificed many lives to gain his own base and selfish ends.

The vengeful yells of the pursuers now warned him that he must again fight for life, and for the life of his fair captive; this time having two of his own men to battle with.

But at this moment a new actor appeared upon the scene.

"It was Nueces Ned!"

Some distance the young scout gained from the abrupt bend in the gully before he could stop, as he was running very fast. When he did halt, the strange scene that met his view amazed him.

Not only did he see the two Greasers whom he had been pursuing, but his gaze lighted upon the gold-crowned head of Bertha Benton, hanging over the arm of the bandit chief!

The heart of the young Texan bounded to his throat.

Yet Ned realized that he had much to accomplish before he could hope to rescue the maiden—much more than it seemed possible for him, in his weakened state, to overcome.

But he hesitated not.

He was not only astonished, but greatly rejoiced, as he, after a moment, interpreted the true position of affairs.

It was strange, nevertheless true, that the two outlaws were now rushing upon their chief with murderous intent.

Nueces Ned did not stop to reason upon this to him most unaccountable state of affairs; but dashed on, knowing that he had a better chance to succeed than he had hoped, through the enmity which now existed between Capitan Carajal and his men. But the latter also saw, and recognized the fact that this lone Texan would be more difficult to deal with than half a dozen of his terrified and demoralized followers.

The cunning villain took the only course open to him to give him the slightest hope of escape.

He raised his arm, and pointing up the gully, yelled fiercely, and in a commanding voice:

"Turn quickly, or the Gringo will run his knife in your backs! Look, he comes like a mad bull!"

Such was the influence of his voice and manner that both the outlaws turned, oaths of mingled surprise and fury bursting from their lips, as they beheld the on-rushing Texan.

At this very favorable turn of affairs, when a moment previous there seemed not the slightest hope of his escaping with his long-coveted prize, Carajal turned, and ran down the bed of the wash-out, continuing his headlong flight toward the Rio Grande!

For a moment the two bandits appeared so bewildered that they were unable to act; but one of them quickly cast a glance backward, thus discovering the flight of his chief.

This perfidious act increased tenfold the hatred that had ruled them, and, with grating teeth and beast-like snarl, one of the outlaws bounded in pursuit of his captain, leaving the other as if frozen in his tracks.

But had the Mexican who remained entertained the thought of joining his comrade in the pursuit of Carajal, his momentary delay rendered it impossible to do so; indeed, the first Greaser had but just escaped the vengeful Nueces Ned, who now darted down the gully with great speed.

The young man could have jerked his revolver and killed the pursuer of Carajal, but something told him not to do this, he feeling that to allow the Mexican to pursue the chief would tend toward the rescue of Bertha by himself.

So sudden had been the discovery of the strange scene as he rushed around the curve, and so unexpected the sight of Bertha senseless, in the arms of her captor, that Ned had not drawn his revolver. He therefore rushed upon the remaining Greaser with knife in hand, so impetuously that both he and the bandit were overthrown, rolling in a deadly embrace on the bed of the wash-out.

Before closing in with the miscreant, however, the scout saw Carajal speed from view around a turn in the gully, the golden hair of Bertha flying wildly over his shoulder, and his pursuer, knife in hand, close upon him.

This flitting sight nerved Nueces Ned for the conflict with his sinewy adversary, for he feared the maiden, in whom he felt so deep an interest, would be foully murdered or would meet a worse fate at the hands of the maddened miscreant who pursued his chief to slay him.

In any event, Bertha Benton was in danger of being borne away from his sight forever, to a fearful fate, even did she escape death!

CHAPTER XV.

A FRUITLESS QUEST.

LITTLE LARIAT saw his mother, escorted by the ranchero, start up the road toward Rio Grande City. He then dashed into the chaparral, his heart tortured by the possible fate of his darling sister.

The sound of a rifle-shot, followed by a shriek, soon caused him to halt. Then, with a groan of anguish, he rushed frantically through the thickets, aiming to strike the road as near the point whence the report proceeded as possible.

It must be, the youth thought, that some fugitive bandit had discovered the ranchero, fired at him and possibly had slain his mother.

There were, he knew, none of the Texans who had ridden to his assistance as near the scene of danger as he was, consequently no help could be expected from them. Quickly he uncoiled from his waist his trusty lasso, and as he ran adjusted the same for casting.

Ere long Little Lariat caught sight of what caused him to bring his lasso into immediate use.

The first object that met his view was his mother, leaning against her horse for support—having evidently been thrown from the animal. Mrs. Benton's face was pale and horror-stricken, her starting eyes fixed upon a point to which her son at once darted a glance.

There he saw the ranchero who had acted as his mother's escort lying upon the road, stunned, if not dead, and his head bleeding profusely. But it did not seem that his assailant believed him dead, for a most brutal-looking Mexican bestrode him, and with gleaming teeth and exultant curses, raised his knife to plunge the blade into his victim's heart.

But, like a flash of light, the lasso of Little Lariat hissed through the air, the noose encircling the neck of the assassin. One more twitch brought the Greaser over backward in the dust of the road, his knife flying from his grasp. The next instant Little Lariat's bowie was plunged into the bandit's breast, and the youth sprung to the side of his mother, who was speechless from her various and violent emotions.

"Thank Heaven!" said the boy, "you are again saved. What should I have—"

At that moment a piercing cry broke from Mrs. Benton, and her son fell to the earth at her feet; she herself being caught by the bandit who had sprung from the chaparral, and felled the young ranchero by a blow from his *escopeta*.

Just then, however, a wild yell came from down the road, and some of the rancheros, who had heard the shot, rushed toward the scene.

Had they not thus opportunely appeared, Little Lariat would have been at once slain by the Greaser; but the latter, now perceiving that he had not a moment to spare, caught up Mrs. Benton and darted back into the thickets, toward the Rio Grande—the Texans not daring to shoot, for fear of killing his captive.

Some little distance were they from the scene when the outlaw disappeared in the chaparral that bordered the road; consequently the villainous abductor had sufficient time to penetrate beyond the hearing of the pursuers, as he stole through the thorny shrubbery.

One of the Texans remained with Little Lariat, who proved to be only stunned, the others plunging into the mesquites in search of the miscreant who had carried away his mother.

However, they had not the slightest success; for direct by a path that was well known to him sped the Greaser with the unconscious woman. Luckily for her, he was suddenly brought to a halt by little Jose Sanchez, who, while wandering in search of Bertha, discovered the outlaw with Mrs. Benton in his arms. The youth was not a little surprised and mystified, for he had left the mother of Little Lariat but recently safe in the bandit camp, only the dead and wounded around her and her son.

Jose had become somewhat accustomed to startling surprises, so he lost no time in wonder, but drew his knife, and stealing from the bushes, sprung upon the ruffian, stabbing him to the heart. But, as it was impossible for the boy to lift and carry Mrs. Benton, he started toward the road for assistance, believing that the woman he had rescued would be perfectly safe where he had left her.

Then it was that the Mexican youth had the circumstances connected with the recapture of Mrs. Benton told him by the ranchero who had remained in charge of Little Lariat; learning then, for the first time, that his young pard had been knocked senseless, narrowly escaping death. The latter was now himself again, and the trio started, taking with them a canteen of water to revive Mrs. Benton.

Jose had left the side of the senseless woman but a moment or two, when Pecan Pete stole up the chaparral path stealthily, having heard the sounds made by the boy's movements. The character of the commotion was decided upon quickly by a man of the old scout's experience.

Pete had exerted himself greatly, employing his keen senses and knowledge of the chaparrals, without having obtained the slightest clew as to the whereabouts of Carajal and his beautiful captive.

But, as the suspicious sounds, caused by the Mexican youth's slaying the abductor of Mrs. Benton broke upon his ear, Pecan Pete believed that he had at last, by accident, detected the position of the bandit chief. Carajal had evidently been in a conflict with some of his pursuers, whom he had slain, or else they had killed him—which Pete could not determine.

Upon advancing further, and discovering within a patch of moonlight, a portion of a woman's dress, the old scout felt positive that he had been correct in his conclusion.

The silence that everywhere reigned was, however, particularly impressive. It was sug-

gestive of danger, and death as well; therefore Pete crawled forward with great caution.

He was, for him, terribly excited; for he feared that Bertha Benton lay dead not far from him. He had not the slightest suspicion that her mother had been captured a second time.

Thus reasoning, and believing there was no danger of a lurker springing upon him—although he was prepared, having knife in hand—Pecan Pete at once clasped Mrs. Benton in his arms, and then springing erect, he lifted her into the clear moonlight.

"Sufferin' Moses!" came from the old man's lips, in the utmost amazement.

Indeed, he came near dropping the senseless woman; so dumfounded was he, to find in his arms one whom he had left far away in the bandit camp, in the care of her son, Little Lariat.

"Dang my ole heart, ef things ain't sorter gittin' on the whirl-mix all 'roun'! What, in thunderation, hes bin rung in on ther p'o-gramme? Whar, in—"

Pete's soliloquy was here broken in upon by the approach of Little Lariat, Jose, and the rancho who had remained in the road with the former.

"Spit music, er I'll shoot!" yelled the old scout, threateningly. "Who air yer, any ole how?"

"Friends!" was Jose's response. "Is that you, Pete?"

"I'm a dang sight more sure hit air me, then I air 'bout some things what's bin goin' on 'roun' hyer ter-night."

"How, in thunderation, kim Marm Benton ter be layin' in ther chap'rel? Leetle Lariat, kin yeou 'splain things?"

"First, tell me, have you any tidings of my sister?"

"Nary a tide! An' I'm consarnedly a worritated 'bout yer marm. She air completely out o' sense. Somebuddy take her, won't yer? I ain't used ter kaliker-kivered female weemin."

The unfortunate lady was soon restored to consciousness, and her joy was great at finding her boy again with her; but soon she was uttering loud wails for her daughter, and all decided that it would be the best move to proceed to the bank of the river. The men reasoned, that possibly the bandit chief had fled at once to the Rio Grande, and might have found some means of crossing it; an attempt which, though dangerous in the extreme, he would hazard, rather than be captured, or be shot down by the pursuing Texans.

Consequently, as it was but a short distance, all set out; Mrs. Benton insisting upon accompanying the party, and vowing she would not be separated again from Bert, her only remaining child.

Little hope had any one among them of ever seeing the fair Bertha on the Texan side of the river.

All wondered greatly where Nueces Ned had disappeared to, and the rancho as well; as they could detect no sounds that would indicate they were in the vicinity.

They little dreamed that the wounded Ned had been more fortunate than any of them, as he had been successful in tracing the bandit chief, and had caught sight of Bertha Benton in the arms of the miscreant marauder, besides overtaking others of the band.

CHAPTER XVI.

DOWN TO THEIR DEATH.

NUECES NED was in no fitting condition to engage in a hand-to-hand fight with the bandit, whom he rushed upon so furiously as to cause both himself and the swarthy miscreant to fall, and roll over in a struggle for life or death, upon the bed of the great gully.

But he had seen the corpse-like face and the golden hair of Bertha Benton, upon the arm of Carajal, and he felt that the destiny of the maiden depended upon him alone.

Too terrible to think of would be her fate, did the bandit chief gain the Mexican side of the Rio Grande with his intended victim. This Ned well knew.

The sight of Bertha, in the hands of such a brutal wretch, nerved the young Texan to almost superhuman effort. There were none of his friends to come to his assistance, and the lives of three Mexicans stood between him and the rescue of the beautiful sister of Little Lariat.

Yet, he was not hopeless of success.

He realized, however, that he must now rush

directly into the arms of the desperate and vengeful Greaser, whose glittering knife circled in the air, preparatory to being plunged into his heart.

Quick as a flash, Ned caught the wrist of the outlaw, preventing the latter from using his knife; but the young scout found that his opponent had been equally successful, his own hand being hampered in the same manner by the tight grip of the desperate ruffian.

Into each other's eyes, as they struggled, the two glared, face to face; now one, now the other holding the advantageous position. Both were obliged to cease all exertion at times, and await, panting, a return of strength.

Nueces Ned at length discovered that the scarf about his wound had become loosened, and that he was again bleeding. Unless by some extraordinary dexterity, he at once gained the victory, he was lost, and Bertha as well.

He concentrated all his mind and strength in the desperate struggle; but, as the thought flashed through his mind that perhaps Capitan Carajal was speeding on with his captive to where it would be impossible to find him, the young man became doubly desperate. The Mexican was at that time astride of him, but Ned braced his feet upon the earth, doubled inward, and succeeded in hurling him over his head: the bandit whirling clear over, and striking upon his back with great violence.

A heavy groan burst from the outlaw, his hold upon the wrist of the young Texan was broken, and the next moment the latter, with some difficulty, got upon hands and knees, crawled beside his antagonist, and buried his bowie in his breast.

Nueces Ned, with great beads of perspiration standing upon his brow, his form convulsed by heavy panting, struggled to his feet, and staggered down the great gully, his blood-dripping knife still in his hand.

One quick glance ahead, and he saw that Carajal, with his fair burden, and the other bandit as well, had all disappeared.

Our young friend halted a moment, to adjust and tighten the sash about his wounded thigh; then, with an almost despairing groan, he proceeded onward.

Soon he reached the next curve of the gully, and for an instant paused; for he saw a few yards ahead of him, an outstretched human form.

Hastening forward, Ned recognized the comrade of the bandit who's life his bowie had ended. This swarthy marauder had also met death in the same manner; and, as the scout knew, by his own chief, Capitan Carajal.

This was strange and puzzling to Ned, but he lost no time in speculating upon it. On he hastened, down the bed of the wash-out, the sides of which now loomed some fifty feet above his head, and were insurmountable.

This fact gave the young Texan hope.

Carajal could not escape him, unless he plunged into the river; and such a step would be almost certain death to him, as well as to Bertha.

On went Nueces Ned, the gully becoming deeper and deeper, and its bed more steep, and at times quite dark; but the keen eyes of the sworn rescuer scanned well his surroundings, making sure that the captor of Bertha did not conceal himself in some cleft of the clay walls until he passed him.

Long the time seemed to Ned, but at length he saw straight ahead, through the mouth of the gully, the broad silvery waters of the Rio Grande. Keenly the young trailer inspected the ground ahead, where wash-out and river met, but those he sought were not to be seen.

Wildly, and nearly in despair, he rushed down the bed of the great gully.

Soon he stood by the surging waters, when a sight met his view that almost took his breath away.

Could he be dreaming?

Not so; for, plainly, he saw in the middle of the river an unwieldy dug-out, or log canoe, breaking the silvery waters; and, in that frail craft, sat Capitan Carajal, plying a paddle, while reclining at the stern lay his still unconscious captive.

The bandit chief was heading his boat for the mouth of a wash-out on the Mexican side of the river; and a quick, sweeping glance showed to Ned that, at that particular portion of the river, both banks were seamed, or cut from the upper level, nearly a hundred feet high, to the water level, by gullies or wash-outs.

The sight of the girl and her captor, apparently about to slip from him forever, almost drove Ned wild; and a taunting laugh and derisive yell from Carajal, who perceived the

Texan on the bank, rendered him frantic with fury.

But Nueces Ned was not one to remain inactive. He had sworn to rescue Bertha Benton, and he had not the remotest idea of breaking that oath, although it now seemed impossible for him to keep it.

Quickly inspecting the right bank of the great gully, where it formed the bank of the Rio Grande, or where bank and bank joined, the young scout gave a wild cry of joy.

He saw that it was possible to surmount this bank, and he rushed forward, and clambered up the same, being at times forced to hack the hard clay with his knife, to form niches for his hands and feet. He had formed a plan, which he determined to carry out, should he find matters as he hoped further up the river.

After a long and laborious continued climbing, Ned reached the top of the high bank; but he made no pause, except to dart a glance down over the silvery river.

Capitan Carajal was three-fourths of the way over the stream, afar below his pursuer, in the great chasm of the Rio Grande.

Ned rushed through the chaparral for several hundred yards, when he came to another gully, the bank of which he saw was possible of descent; although the attempt would be dangerous, especially in his weakened state.

But the Texan hesitated not, and soon stood once more by the waters of the river.

Fortune favored him, for a drift-log had become caught on a sand-bar near the bank, and, without a moment's hesitation, he plunged into the river, throwing himself forward, and crawling over the treacherous quicksands to the log. By the assistance of this, he started to cross the river, aiming to land at the mouth of a gully, above that to which Carajal was heading, but far below the point from which he himself had started.

This was necessary, owing to the swift current.

Ned soon gained a quarter of the distance across the broad river, and gazed down the silvery breast of the Bravo, at the boat of Carajal, as it touched the bank, and the bandit chief sprung ashore, with Bertha Benton in his arms.

This was at the mouth of another gully, or immense seam in the towering wall of clay, which, by wind and wash of rains, was cut and carved into a thousand weird shapes, up and down its sides. At the point where the outlaw landed, the bank high above his head actually overhung the river; the earth having crumbled and fallen into the stream, afar up from the surface of the rolling waters.

The prospect was not encouraging.

Ned swam with greater speed, feeling revived by the cool waters; for he believed the Mexican would at once rush up the wash-out, and escape afar inland from the river, amid the chaparrals, with his captive.

The plan of the young scout was to land at the next gully above that in which Capitan Carajal was, rush up the same, and dash across to cut off the retreat of the bandit and thus rescue Bertha. Burdened as the abductor was, this appeared possible.

As Ned gazed at Carajal, he heard the wretch yell defiantly and exultantly; but he knew the bandit was not looking toward him, being without doubt unaware of his presence in the river, or he would not thus linger. The gaze of the outlaw chief, as he had yelled, was directed over the Rio Grande to the top of the north bank; and, turning his eyes in that direction, Ned saw two groups of human beings, one on each side of the great gully, down which Carajal had escaped.

Our friend knew those on the west side of the wash-out, to be Little Lariat, Jose Sanchez, Mrs. Benton, and a rancho.

Those on the east side were the Texans, who had ridden from Rio Grande City to pursue the bandits.

All were gesticulating wildly to each other.

Again Ned gazed over to the Mexican side.

Carajal and his captive had disappeared in the dark depths of the gully, and the young Texan, drawing himself upon the log, free from the water to his waist, gave a far-sounding yell, at the same time waving his hands in the air. His yell was heard, and he was discovered by the almost frantic rancho, who cheered him on lustily.

Evidently they believed he would rescue Bertha, which they were powerless to do.

Nueces Ned redoubled his exertions, and soon neared the south bank, when, to his astonishment, he again beheld Carajal, at the mouth of the gully, down-stream.

It was plain that the outlaw believed him-

self secure from pursuit, and could not resist the temptation to again taunt the Texans by uttering yells of derision and triumph.

Doubtless he had left Bertha, some distance within the gully.

Ned now made great efforts to reach the bank.

His first wish was to avoid being discovered by the bandit chief. The young scout swam with hope to brace him.

Again he glanced at Carajal, and saw the latter point a pistol, snapping the weapon again and again.

At last one chamber exploded.

Ned believed this to be a signal to some of the band on the Mexican side of the river. He now sprang on shore and into the gully without being seen by Carajal.

Up the wash-out he madly rushed.

It seemed for miles, although it was but three hundred yards, before he reached a point at which the bank could be climbed.

Soon he was upon the level, among sparse mesquites and clumps of cacti, rushing east to find the gully in which he hoped to discover Bertha Benton. But he was obliged to crouch low and hide, for he heard the sound of hoofs near at hand.

Peering from his covert, he saw three brutal-looking Mexicans gallop toward the river-bank, aiming to strike the same at the junction of the gully and the river where Capitan Carajal had landed.

These Greasers were evidently bandits, drawn by the report of their chief's pistol.

They saw the group of Texans on the opposite bank, and yelled derisively.

This sight, however, would distract their attention from Carajal, who was far below them.

Thus reasoned Ned. Indeed, he knew the outlaws could not see their leader, on account of the overhanging bank.

As Ned thought of this, and saw the three riders gallop recklessly up to the very edge of the bank he shuddered.

The next moment, horses and riders shot downward, and horrible shrieks filled the air!

Again the scout shuddered.

He then rushed forward.

Soon he saw a break in the ground ahead of him.

His heart leaped with joy, but that joy was increased ten-fold, as he saw slowly rising from the break in the earth, the pale face and golden hair of Bertha Benton.

Nueces Ned cried out wildly:

"Back, Miss Benton! Back for your life! I have come to save you!"

The bright vision vanished.

The next moment, the young Texan sprang down into the gully.

Bertha Benton stood there, wan and trembling, joy and relief, mingled with wonder, imprinted upon her fair face.

Ned stood not upon ceremony, but clasped the maiden in his arms, exclaiming:

"I am Nueces Ned, the friend of your brother, and of yourself! He and your mother are safe, and I will save you, or die in the attempt!"

Trusting, Bertha suffered her rescuer to clasp her to his breast; his brown and wavy hair mingling with her golden tresses.

Weak and broken, the eyes of the poor girl closed, and she lay as if all sense had again departed from her; but, even in that half-dazed state, she still looked up, from time to time, into the face of her preserver, until the dark shades of the wash-out shut out all but the outline of his head, as he sped down the steep of the river.

When the young Texan reached the water's edge, he uttered an ejaculation of relief; for the dug-out was secured on the east side of the mouth of the gully.

Ned gazed upward toward the west bank, and again shuddered.

Capitan Carajal was not to be seen.

The bank, afar overhead, no longer overhung the waters!

It was plain to the young man, that a great avalanche of earth started by the three horsemen, had fallen, and been swept down the rolling waters of the Rio Grande; the mounted bandits accompanying it, and Carajal being buried beneath it!

The trio of outlaws had been drawn to their doom by the pistol-shot of their leader, and had followed him on the long dark trail.

Ned sprang into the dug-out, and laid Bertha tenderly in the stern of the same, placing his *jaqueta* beneath her head.

Then, as he cast loose, and took the long oar, shoving off from the shore, there shot across

the great chasm from the high Texan bank, a round of cheers that caused Bertha to sit up in the canoe, and wave her hand; for she could see her friends fairly dancing with joy, far above and beyond the broad sheet of shimmering waters of the Bravo.

Nowhere on earth was there a more grateful and happy man than Nueces Ned, as his eyes met the expressive orbs of Bertha Benton; the latter now gazing in soul-felt gratitude and sincere regard into his face, as he urged the rude boat toward the Texan side.

The current, however, carried the craft far down the stream, forcing them to land at least a quarter of a mile below the mouth of the wash-out, from whence Canales Carajal had embarked with his captive.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE USUAL CONSEQUENCES.

DEAR reader, we have little more to relate in connection with the destruction of Benton Ranch, the capture of Mrs. Benton and her beautiful daughter by the bandits of Cortina under Capitan Carajal.

The anxiously watching Texans on the north bank of the river had seen the return of the outlaw chief to the mouth of the gully without his captive, and had been greatly tortured with anxiety, besides being much puzzled.

Little hope had they of ever again beholding the maiden, until they at length perceived Nueces Ned crossing the river on the log. Then their joy knew no bounds.

They had feared Ned had been slain, consequently the sight of the young man, in a fair way to accomplish the rescue of the darling of their hearts, filled the mother and brother with great joy and relief, to say nothing of the other spectators.

But, when Carajal returned to the mouth of the gully and succeeded in firing off his revolver, the trio of bandits soon appearing—apparently in answer to his signal—then all were again plunged into anxiety, believing Bertha, and Ned also, to be lost.

All were fated, however, to witness a most terrible spectacle, for the gallop of the three mustangs upon the overhanging bank caused the same to give way. A huge mass of earth many tons in weight, together with the shrieking men and mustangs, was precipitated down the vast height into the river, Capitan Carajal, who happened to be standing on the west side of the gully hurling taunts at the Texans, being buried beneath the avalanche and the waters of the Rio Bravo!

It seemed to those who witnessed it, to be a just retribution; nevertheless it was terrible to behold.

When Nueces Ned appeared, with the maiden in his arms, the joy of all knew no bounds; but, as the dug-out cut the waters, they realized that it would be forced to land some distance down the river. This made it necessary for all to make a roundabout trip, to gain the point of landing, except those on the east side of the wash-out.

The meeting between mother and daughter was most affecting, as was also that between the rescued sister and Little Lariat.

The emotions of all were so deep that they did not know, or observe, that Nueces Ned had no sooner placed Bertha in her mother's arms, than he sunk to the earth, in a dead faint; his strength, so fearfully overtaxed, giving way at the last.

The rancheros, however—some of them at least—saw that Ned had given out; and they sprang to his assistance, striving to revive him.

But Bertha Benton did not forget the brave young man, who had risked so much to rescue her; and as soon as she could tear herself from Little Lariat, she turned to thank her deliverer. When she saw that he had fainted, she insisted on going at once to his aid and herself administering the restoratives.

It was then that she discovered that the young scout, during his exertions in her behalf, had been suffering from a severe wound; and then, not only was the maiden's heart deeply touched, but praises of her rescuer fell from every tongue.

"Sufferin' Moses!" put in Pecan Pete; "yer doesn't know thet pard o' mine, boyees. But I reckon yer will, arter this, kinder 'low he air a man c'lar from the ground up."

"He's lost bleed nough ter make a buffler-bull wilt down onder ther perrarer, run its tongue out an' lose all its vim. Dang me, ef I ain't proud o' my pard Ned, an' I c'd skip a lively fandang' ef I hed a squar' feed! I'd like

ter do hit out'n pure joy, 'count o' ther caliker bein' all O. K."

The gratitude and regard of Little Lariat and his mother was most deep and sincere toward Nueces Ned; and the fair Bertha's feelings, as all at once saw, were still more tender. She would probably have betrayed them, had not the general agitation under which she labored prevented her giving way to any single emotion.

Ned speedily regained his senses, and his joy was most ecstatic when he again looked into Bertha's eyes and read within their azure depths the tell-tale secret of her admiration and affection for him; a passion which was born of gratitude, but which, he felt sure, would be in time transformed into a love that would bind her to him for life.

The young Texan was taken in hand by Pecan Pete, horses were brought, and all mounted, soon starting toward Rio Grande City, where they arrived, weary and hungry, as the sun made its appearance.

All received the greatest praise and sympathy, and a home was offered to the Bentons by one of the citizens until such time as the ranch could be rebuilt, and Cortina should be so badly whipped that he would not dare venture again into Texas.

Not long after the occurrences we have recorded, the great battle of the Cortina War was fought; some three hundred rangers, under the brave and gallant Colonel John Ford, known as "Old Rip," defeating the bandit forces, which were commanded by Cortina in person. The Greasers were shot down by scores while swimming the Rio Grande, after leaving the greater portion of their number, either dead or mortally wounded, in the chaparrals.

Nueces Ned, Pecan Pete, and Little Lariat fought in this battle with great bravery, and all three were wounded.

After this, "ranching it" on the Rio Grande became less dangerous.

Mrs. Benton had her home and corrals rebuilt, another cottage being erected in the vicinity. This, ere long, was occupied by the prosperous ranger and scout, Nueces Ned, or Edward Ewing, and Bertha his wife.

Little Lariat and Jose Sanchez made their home with Mrs. Benton, and not infrequently the lank form of Pecan Pete might be seen, breaking through the mesquites upon his horse, and yelling:

"Sufferin' Moses! Hyer I am ag'in! Dang my ole heart, folkses, ef I hain't come ter see yer fer a bit!"

But it was not many years after the rebuilding of Benton Ranch, when other dwellings besides the happy home of Ned and Bertha were erected in the "open." Jose took to wife a fair senorita, and Little Lariat was not long in following suit. These additions to the home circle, however, caused no divisions, beyond those made by the vine-covered walls of the respective dwellings; and, as ever, union was strength.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers.

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